

LIFE IS CHANGED, NOT ENDED

PREPARING YOUR JOURNEY FROM THIS WORLD TO THE NEXT

Your death can be the most important moment of your life, as you enter into the eternal and heavenly home of God's kingdom. Like any journey, passing from this world to the next ought to be well prepared. It is never too early or too late to begin to prepare. No matter how long you have left on this earth, no matter if you have been away from the Church, no matter what sins you may have committed, Christ wants to welcome you home.

Taking the time to prepare for that final journey will give you peace and courage, guiding you and your loved ones through that final, difficult, and sacred time. Acknowledging mortality and planning for the end of life on this earth can be one of the most difficult preparations you will ever make. It will also be one of the most important, for God desires that you "should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

SPIRITUAL PREPARATIONS

It can be tempting to put off preparations for death. But you have less control over life than you might imagine, and in truth "you know not the day nor the hour" (Matt. 25:13). It is your responsibility to "watch and pray" (Matt. 26:41), to be ready to meet the Lord when he calls.

Living prepared for death will change your life now for the better. As the Psalmist prays, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain wisdom of heart" (Ps. 90:12). It will give you perspective, will guide your choices, will make patience and forgiveness easier, will add depth and meaning to otherwise mundane activities, and will give you wisdom and peace.

Christ has given us everything necessary to prepare ourselves in the life of the Church. Seek him in prayer and in the sacraments, and make friendship with God your first priority:

- ◆ Pray Daily
- ◆ Attend Sunday Mass
- ◆ Go to Confession Regularly (*monthly*)



When You Become Ill

If you become seriously sick, take courage, for the Lord is with you. Continue and intensify the spiritual and religious practices of your daily life, insofar as the limitations imposed by illness allow. If you are unable to attend Sunday Mass because of illness, you are excused from the Sunday Obligation. As soon as you become seriously ill, you should ask your parish priest to give you the Sacraments that Christ instituted for the care of the sick:

- ◆ Confession
- ◆ Anointing of the Sick
(*for healing of soul and sometimes of body*)
- ◆ Holy Communion

When You're Dying

When the end of your earthly journey draws near, see a priest. If you are at home or in a hospital close to home, call your parish priest. He will come to you if you are unable to come to the Church. This is one of his principal duties, which he is commanded to carry out with generous love. You may also ask your medical team to call for a priest, as each hospital will have an arrangement with clergy on staff or with nearby parishes.

The "Last Rites" is not a different sacrament, but simply the last time we receive the sacraments. It is an intensification and capstone of the sacraments that have been given to us throughout our whole life. You should plan to make a confession and receive the Anointing of the Sick and Holy Communion. In the final moments of life you may also receive:

- ◆ The Apostolic Pardon (*a plenary indulgence given through the apostolic blessing of a priest. If a priest is unavailable, any Catholic can obtain this apostolic pardon for themselves, provided they have been in the habit of reciting some prayers during their lifetime*)
- ◆ The Commendation of the Dying (*a set of prayers intended to give comfort and encouragement to imitate Christ in his patient suffering and dying*)

MEDICAL DECISION MAKING

Medical Ethics in End-of-Life Treatments

The most important moral distinction in end-of-life medical care is between ordinary means and extraordinary means.

Ordinary means are treatments that offer a reasonable hope of benefit and do not impose an excessive burden or expense. Ordinary medical means are always morally obligatory and may not be refused.

Extraordinary means are treatments that impose an excessive burden disproportionate to their benefit, or do not offer a reasonable hope of benefit. For example, given the progression of illness, CPR or intubation may offer little benefit and impose significant burdens. Extraordinary medical means are morally optional and may be refused. For more details, see the *Additional Resources* section.

Whether a medical treatment is ordinary or extraordinary depends on the particular situation. It is your responsibility to make that judgment, seeking counsel from your parish priest and trusted moral authorities. It is also your responsibility to choose whether to receive or decline extraordinary medical treatment, weighing medical opinion, benefits and burdens.

Preparing for Medical Decision Making

An advance medical directive is a legal document describing your desires for medical treatment. A healthcare proxy (also called a “durable power of attorney for healthcare”) designates a trusted individual to act on your behalf if you become unable to make medical decisions. Preparing these documents does not require an attorney. Making these arrangements is an act of charity, relieving your family of the burden of making decisions for you without your input. Your healthcare proxy should be someone who will abide by Catholic moral principles and your own desires. For more details, see the *Additional Resources* section.

Common Pitfalls of Advance Directives

When preparing an advance directive, it is important to avoid blanket and absolute refusals or acceptances of treatments. Circumstances are impossible to know ahead of time. Poorly written documents may prevent you from receiving treatments that would benefit you, or they may force you to endure futile treatments. A better approach outlines your general desires and leaves appropriate flexibility for your healthcare proxy to apply your wishes in the particular circumstances.

Legal documents like “Medical/Provider Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment” (MOLST/POLST) can be especially problematic. If you issue a MOLST or POLST, be careful that it does not contain blanket statements to refuse or accept treatments which could terminate, prevent, or extend care against your will, or interfere with your proxy’s ability to carry out your wishes. In general, a MOLST or POLST should be avoided, instead relying on a trusted healthcare proxy.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Reconciliation with Others

Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile? Is anything left unsaid or undone? Reaching out to ask and give forgiveness, even if it is not reciprocated, will give you peace of heart and mind. St. John reminds us that “we know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers” (1 John 3:14).

Financial Preparations

Writing a will and pre-planning your funeral Mass and burial are important ways to support and provide for your loved ones. This is your final opportunity to use the goods that God has given you for a good purpose: to care for your family or to donate to the poor or to the Church. Scripture says that “almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin” (Tobit 12:9).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ◆ **Catholic Guide to End-of-Life Decisions (includes a Sample Advance Medical Directive and Health Care Proxy)**
National Catholic Bioethics Center, ncbcenter.org
- ◆ **Now and at the Hour of Our Death: Catholic Guidance for End-of-Life Decision Making (includes state-specific resources)**
catholicendoflife.org
- ◆ **Salvifici Doloris: On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering**
St. John Paul II
- ◆ **Catechism of the Catholic Church 1499-1532**
- ◆ **The Art of Dying, A New Annotated Translation**
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Produced by Dominican Healthcare Ministry
A ministry of the Dominican Friars
of the Province of St. Joseph

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