



DAY for
LIFE

Sunday, 16 June 2024

The Lord is my Shepherd

Compassion and Hope
at the End of Life

This year's *Day for Life* focuses on care at the end of life
and the need to build a culture of care.

Bishops' Commendation

Day for Life is celebrated each year across three Episcopal Conferences - England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland. Bishop John Sherrington (England and Wales), Bishop Kevin Doran (Ireland), and Bishop John Keenan (Scotland) commend this year's theme.



There has been much discussion in the media recently about 'assisted suicide', whereby people who feel they are overburdened by suffering will be facilitated in bringing their lives to a premature end by a change in legislation. The Catholic Church opposes this.

As Catholics, along with many people of other faiths and none, we share a different vision about what it is to be fully human, especially when we are suffering and approaching death in the hope of eternal life. People who are coming towards the end of their lives can feel vulnerable, and recent research shows that many consider themselves a burden on their loved ones and wider society. Jesus shows us that life always has dignity and that there is no such thing as a useless life. We are called to defend this gift of life to its natural end and to protect vulnerable citizens from a culture that could pressure them into assisted suicide. We support people with the companionship of a listening ear, appropriate treatment, and the best of care, so that their last days can be times of grace, intimacy and love.

Jesus did not send the sick away. Our Lady remained at the foot of the Cross to the very end as Her Son, Jesus, died. Mary is the model of compassionate presence and prayer whom we are called to imitate. People close to death and their loved ones, often go through similar darkness and pain but can come to a more complete acceptance and find peace in those treasured last moments accompanied by spiritual care.

Bishop John Sherrington, Bishop Kevin Doran, and Bishop John Keenan

Chaplain's Message

This year's message for Day for Life is written by a hospital chaplain, who shares a testimony of compassion, hope and care.



The prospect of death can evoke a variety of thoughts and feelings among those who are dying and their loved ones. Our faith directs us towards a life that extends beyond death and encourages us to see the end of life as an opportunity for love. Father George reflects on the gift of accompanying the dying in their last days.

The Church reminds us that “despite our best efforts, it is hard to recognise the profound value of human life when we see it in its weakness and fragility.” (*Samaritanus Bonus*, Letter, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2020) This challenging reality shapes the way that many in society think about those who are suffering towards the end of their lives.

As Christians, we have the perfect model of how to cope with suffering in the example of the Lord Jesus. It is a model that can inspire those who are facing death as well as those who surround them on their last journey.

As disciples of Christ, we need to see our lives as being a continuing response to the call to follow him, including the times when we need to take up the crosses which we have been given to carry. We need to know that the call to follow will mean climbing our own Calvary at some stage.



In my experience as a hospital chaplain, I have come to appreciate that we are never alone on our Calvary: our way of the cross is populated with those who seek to help us share our burden. In the course of our lives, all of us will probably have the opportunity to help others as they climb towards the summit of their own Calvary, acting as a Veronica or a Simon of Cyrene.

Even if I have only been a bystander on someone's Calvary as chaplain, I have seen how the dying can so often grow as they struggle upwards, leading the way, and allowing family and friends to learn important lessons in compassionate love as they share in climbing the Calvary of someone for whom they care. I will just recount one story to illustrate this point.

Francis had been admitted into the palliative care ward with a prison officer at the door of his room to keep everyone safe. It seemed that his life was in ruins. He had been serving time as a convicted drug dealer when he received the devastating news that he had terminal cancer and didn't have long to live.

Although he had been baptised a Catholic, I was warned by the hospital to avoid contact: "Father George don't go near him. He's very angry with God, and blames God and the Catholic Church for everything that's gone wrong in his life. And he's very dangerous!"

I used to make frequent visits to another patient called Liam in the neighbouring room to Francis, just along the corridor. Every time I passed his room, I would glance in to see Francis sitting upright in his bed, and would be met with an intense glare, his eyes full of angry hatred.

Some time later, I received a call from the hospital at about 3am. I was told that Liam was dying and was asked to go and say some prayers. I dragged myself out of bed and over to the hospital. I spent some time at Liam's bedside, saying the prayers of commendation, and Liam died.

As I left and passed Francis's room, he shouted out to me "Priest!" There was no guard. "Has Liam died?" he asked. And so I went into his room, and we began to talk.

We talked about Liam and how peacefully he had died, and we talked about death and life after death. By the time

dawn broke, Francis had been reconciled to the Church, and the next two weeks were beautiful.

He made peace with the many people whom he had hurt in his family, he received all the Sacraments and he had people praying around his bedside when the time came to follow Liam peacefully into the hands of the Lord.

His last words to me were "Father George, ask St Francis to pray for me," and I did so, along with a prayer for Liam, whose own death had opened up for Francis the way towards eternal life. How wonderfully strange that out of the time Francis was given to live with the frightening prospect of death, he was given the capacity to find peace so that he could truly rest in peace.

As a hospital chaplain, my role is especially to remind people that the Lord is always calling us from beyond Calvary: "Come you blessed of my Father...inherit the kingdom prepared for you".

In our modern culture, we often view life as disposable and assume that everything should be under our control and open to our choice – hence the promotion of assisted suicide. In fact, assisted suicide ultimately involves the denial of an opportunity to live our last days surrounded by compassion and love just as Francis did. It denies us the real dignity that comes from spiritual growth as our bodies diminish.

Caring for people at the end of their lives is a beautiful vocation. It is a vocation lived out by hospital chaplains, doctors, nurses, social carers, family, friends, extraordinary ministers of the eucharist and members of parish groups, such as the SVP. Indeed, we all respond to our calling to care each week at Mass when we pray for the sick. Perhaps if we can renew our vocation to care for others at the end of life, it will help change our culture so that more people come to view the end of life differently and see it as a time for spiritual growth which can be filled with grace and love.

Father George, Hospital Chaplain



Prayer

These two prayers: a psalm, and a prayer written by St John Henry Newman, can be used on or around *Day for Life* to bring our intentions to the Lord.

The Lord is My Shepherd, A Psalm

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

Prayer of St John Henry Newman

This prayer exposes the shared aspect of death and suffering. It can be said along with family and friends.

O Lord,
support us all the day long of this troublous life,
until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes,
and the busy world is hushed,
and the fever of life is over, and our work is done.
Then, Lord, in thy mercy,
grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest,
and peace at the last.
Amen.



Day for Life

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