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## Letters to the Editor

Catholic Medical Association

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**The PVS Patient**

**To the Editor:**

I would like to commend you for several excellent articles regarding nutrition and hydration for patients in persistent vegetative state (PVS) published in the last few issues of *The Linacre*.

Mr. Scott A. McConnaha, in his article "Artificial Nutrition and Hydration: Recent Changes in Understanding Obligations," (*Linacre Quarterly*, August, 2004) gives a nice history of the moral teachings surrounding this issue. But I think his conclusion that the March, 2004 statement of John Paul II contradicts the Catholic tradition is incorrect (In that statement John Paul says one cannot ethically justify abandoning basic care including food and hydration for PVS patients.).

I admit my amateur status as a theologian, but the following are my observations:

When a patient is dying of an underlying fatal disease and death is imminent, one is not obliged to do things in any way burdensome (including a feeding tube) in order to squeeze out a few extra hours or even days. That would be "vitalism" or "physicalism." The patient is going to die soon of this fatal disease, no matter what is done. Obviously comfort care and compassionate solidarity should be provided. In my view, however, a patient who is in persistent vegetative state and is otherwise stable does not fit into this category. The fact that a PVS patient

can live indefinitely with food and hydration, albeit with assistance, indicates that the patient is not dying of the underlying pathological condition. If the patient is not fed, as a pathologist I would view the cause of death as starvation.

So, for an otherwise stable PVS patient, the use of a feeding tube, which in and of itself is not too burdensome, is a benefit in that it allows the patient to live. In my view, those who say the feeding tube provides no benefit are really saying that the patient's life itself is of no benefit.

That is a line we cannot cross and is not consistent with the Catholic tradition.

Therefore, I propose that John Paul's statement and Dr. Diamond's article on this issue are consistent with the Catholic Tradition.

— James E. Brown, Jr., M.D.  
Metairie, LA

**Politicians and Communion**

**To the Editor:**

In the February, 2004 *Linacre*, I was troubled by the rather strident positions taken in two of the articles, essentially condemning all those who have not publicly condemned abortion as being as guilty as the abortionist and saying that all national Catholic politicians should be denied communion.

Dr. Nigro tells us: "...anyone who performs, is for, or does not protest abortion IS an abortionist!"

(capitals and exclamation mark are the author's) and, "Actually, anyone ... who does not protest abortion has forfeited the right for moral argumentation about anything ...discrediting them completely."

Dr. Riga tells us: "Any Catholic legislator who would hold differently has an erroneous conscience and to that degree is not a Catholic. He or she should refrain from the reception of the scared Eucharist because he or she is not in full communion with the Church."

God is God, completely good and completely right in every way. He has left us with the unassailable dictum to "love God with our whole heart... and love our neighbor as ourselves."

What does that mean in our daily life? That is what God leaves for us to answer. Of course, He does not leave us orphans, but has blessed us with the Magisterium of the Church, and the Holy Spirit. The Church and its theologians have, over the centuries, given us volumes to guide us. What they have taught us is that guilt is not an absolute, take it or leave it, one size fits all. They teach us that moral acts (and we are performing them every minute of every day) involve three things: the object, the motivation, and the circumstances. Some things *are* always wrong, but the Church, in its God-given wisdom, teaches us that a person's moral culpability is tempered by two other things. We can do a bad thing, but the circumstances and motivation can ameliorate the guilt. We can also do good things, but our motivation or circumstances can make them an evil (e.g., giving alms so that we can be praised by others).

The variables change from person

to person, place to place, and moment to moment.

Again, that is not to say that there is not an absolute Good (There is. It's God), or that in any given circumstance there is not a Right and a Wrong thing to do (There is, but only God holds that with certainty.).

What I do mean to say is that it is not as clear as the above authors would suggest, once you get down to condemning a particular person for a particular act. Doesn't Jesus tell us not to judge, lest we be judged? Doesn't He tell us to take the beam out of our own eye, before removing the speck from our brother's?

There has been much written about Pius XII, that he should have spoken out more against the Holocaust. Did he do right to remain relatively silent, as the Church and Catholics secretly helped save those they could or should he have been more vocal with less success?

There are many reasons people may not be as openly vocal about abortion as the Pro-Life movement. Perhaps their concern is the thousands of children dying, of starvation each year in the world. Perhaps they feel that partisan position-taking undermines their credibility, and prefer to counsel the young and pregnant in a quiet, less confrontational way.

There are many reasons a politician may not vote against abortion. First of all, in politics, rarely do issues come out so clearly that one can vote "for" or "against" an idea. Usually, it is more like funding for health clinics for the poor, where contraception and maybe abortions are practiced, but also care for the

aged and infirm, who otherwise would suffer. And that funding is tucked away in a budget of billions of dollars, with thousands of other programs, some good, some not. But the vote is for the whole thing, take it or leave it. If only good programs were passed, I wonder if any budget would ever be enacted!

Second, in politics, one has to put things, unfortunately, in the realm of feasibility in a pluralistic society. When the majority of people disagree with you and would probably oppose and undermine your law, even if you could pass it, should that be your goal? Or should a "guerrilla war" against the details of such a practice be an aim? To limit it, restrict it, not fund it? There have been a lot of politicians who ran on a pro-life ticket. Their emphasis on abortion as an overriding issue is important.

One thing I know is true. Jesus didn't stay in heaven and pass down a set of "Cider House Rules", He gave us those rules, and then came down as one of us, to live a perfect example of how to follow them. And in that example, He loved the sinners, spent time with the tax collectors, and only condemned those who condemned their neighbor.

— **Richard J. Gauthier, M.D.**  
**Ripon, WI**