



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

### **Now and at the Hour of Our Death**

*Questions & Answers*

May 29, 2013

#### ***Why are the bishops reissuing this pastoral letter?***

The first edition of *Now and at the Hour of Our Death* was published in April 2002 and gave voice to the Wisconsin bishops' concern and compassion for those facing critical health care decisions. Four years later, in March 2006, the need for a reprint of the document presented a timely opportunity for revision of the statement to reflect ongoing developments in the area of end-of-life decision-making.

*Now and the Hour of Our Death* remains a popular resource and a third printing of the document is required. Current conversations regarding care management, chronic illness, dying, and advance planning give rise to questions, especially among Catholics. In this latest edition of their pastoral letter, the bishops of Wisconsin continue to emphasize and give witness to the Church's longstanding moral guidance on these issues. The new edition affirms the Catholic moral and ethical framework for making such difficult and serious decisions.

#### ***Are there any significant changes in the revised edition?***

No. The fundamental moral guidance offered in the first and second editions continue in this third edition. However this latest edition features some new references:

- An updated reference to the "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services" (ERDs), the fifth edition of which was distributed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 2009. Since the fifth edition of the ERDs includes a revised ERD (No. 58) on the obligation to provide patients with nutrition and hydration, the third edition of the Wisconsin bishops' statement now reflects this change.
- Additional guidance on the use of advance directives, with specific reference to the increasing use of Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) in Wisconsin. The bishops caution against the use of POLST, citing their July 2012 pastoral letter, "Upholding the Dignity of Human Life."
- Updated statistics and references, as well as an expanded glossary and listing of suggested resources.

#### ***What does the pastoral letter say about patients in a "persistent vegetative state" (PVS) and nutrition and hydration?***

The revised pastoral letter quotes from the recently revised ERD Number 58, which states:

In principle, there is an obligation to provide patients with food and water, including medically assisted nutrition and hydration for those who cannot take food orally. This obligation extends to patients in chronic and presumably irreversible conditions (e.g.,

the “persistent vegetative state”) who can reasonably be expected to live indefinitely if given such care. Medically assisted nutrition and hydration become morally optional when they cannot reasonably be expected to prolong life or when they would be “excessively burdensome for the patient or [would] cause significant physical discomfort, for example resulting from complications in the use of the means employed.” For instance, as a patient draws close to inevitable death from an underlying progressive and fatal condition, certain measures to provide nutrition and hydration may become excessively burdensome and therefore not obligatory in light of their very limited ability to prolong life or provide comfort.

***Does the new edition call for any new legislative action?***

No. Both euthanasia and assisted suicide are currently illegal in Wisconsin. The laws governing living wills and power of attorney for health care documents also include a presumption in favor of continuing artificial nutrition and hydration, unless it is medically contraindicated.

***What is the single most important message I should take from the document?***

Do not wait until you or a loved one is near death to reflect on the issues we must face at the end of life. Now is the time to talk these issues through with your family and anyone you might designate to make health care decisions on your behalf.

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