

A LESSON ON CARING FOR THE VULNERABLE

GRADES 7-9 -- Dignity at Every Age- Lesson I (Year I, Day 3)

Goal: Students will explore the concepts of illness through the lens of the dignity of every person at every stage. Through stories, students will realize that the elderly and the sick have love to give and need to receive love.

Materials: Bible

The Church teaches that every life has value regardless of one's ability, and that God has a plan for each life from birth up until death. We are called to accompany those who are suffering with illness and to give them hope that because of Jesus' Passion, Death and Resurrection, even our suffering has meaning as an opportunity to love and be loved.

Watch: [The Sacred Gift of the Person at the End of Life](#) by the Sisters of Life

Discussion:

- Why is every life sacred? Where does its value come from?
- Can suffering, disability or dependency change the value of a life?
- Why is it necessary to let go of 'control' at the end of life?
- What does it mean to say that life is a gift?

Lesson: **"Medical Aid in Dying"** is when a doctor prescribes medication to end the life of a person in order to end what is considered unbearable suffering. There are different forms of what is known as "Medical Aid in Dying". **"Assisted suicide"** is when the patient takes the medication prescribed to end his or her own life. **"Euthanasia"** is when the doctor or another person administers the deadly drugs to end the life of their patient whether at the patient's request (voluntary euthanasia), or sometimes without the patient's knowledge or permission. Voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide are legal in many countries throughout the world, but there are different rules in different places for what qualifies a person to legally end their life. Some laws require that a person have less than 6 months to live, but others require only that a person be suffering, even from an incurable mental illness or a permanent disability, such as in the Netherlands. In the United States, there are 10 states in addition to Washington D.C. where Assisted Suicide is legal, although currently only for those with a terminal illness. Assisted Suicide is not currently legal in New York state, however advocates are pushing hard to pass legislation to permit it as well as expand it those

states where it is already permitted. Although advocates claim that practices like these are compassionate and permit people to choose to die with “dignity”, our faith teaches us that ending one’s own life or the life of another is always gravely wrong. Life is a gift to be treasured, even in the face of great suffering. We can do all we can to alleviate pain, but killing shows a disregard for the sacred gift of each person’s life.

Watch: [Man of Steel](#) by Patients Rights Action Fund

JJ Hanson was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer as a young father. In the video, he mentions the case of Brittany Maynard. She was another young person diagnosed with the same form of brain cancer. She traveled to Oregon, where Assisted Suicide is legal, in order to end her life on her own terms. JJ instead chose to fight the disease and treasure every day he had with his family.

Discussion:

- What in JJ’s background has prepared him to accept this challenge and never give up fighting for life?
- What does he have in his life worth fighting for?
- How did the experience of illness change Kris and JJ’s relationship? Do you think their love grew stronger through it? Why?
- Sometimes people who are sick feel like a burden to others but Kris called JJ her “hero.” What gift can someone who is ill or weak offer to those around them? (*giving others the opportunity to love you and care for you is not a burden but a gift*)

Watch: [JJ’s Final Days](#) by Patients Rights Action Fund

This video was made about 3 years after the first video and depicts JJ’s final days of life and the beautiful love between him and his wife Kris.

Discussion:

- How is JJ different in this video compared to the previous one?
- Does Kris love him less when he is weak and vulnerable?
- What touches you about this video?
- What would JJ and his family have missed out on if they had made the choice that Brittany Maynard made?
- Even though the past years have been very difficult, would they have traded the time they had together?
- Kris mentions that people could be hurt by the legalization of assisted suicide and euthanasia. Who do you think these people are? (*People who might feel like burdens - the sick, elderly, the disabled might feel pressured to end their lives. Vulnerable people might be denied expensive treatments or care if simply ending their lives was a more ‘cost-effective’ option*)

Activity: Have the students write about a person in their life who has needed to be taken care of. Have them

recall why that person needed help, how the caregiver helped them, and what they learned from the person who needed help. How was serving this person a gift, not a burden? Encourage students to share with the class.

Prayer:

Jesus, when You were on earth, people brought the sick to You and You healed them all.

Today I ask You to bless all those who are sick, weak and in pain.

For those who are helpless and who must lie in bed:

Bless your people, O Lord.

For those who must face life with some disability:

Bless your people, O Lord.

For those suffering from any kind of illness and for their caregivers:

Bless your people, O Lord.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lessons adapted from the plans on the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Office of Life, Justice and Peace website.