people, or people with illness or special needs, can feel useless or like a burden. The more our culture encourages them to feel that way, and the more their families are too busy for them, the more attractive assisted suicide or euthanasia becomes.

The debate around assisted suicide or euthanasia often focuses on “death with dignity”. In fact, “euthanasia” means “good death”. Assisted suicide is often described as a way for someone with a terminal illness to choose the time of his or her own death rather than being forced to suffer or linger in discomfort. Euthanasia occurs when a family member or doctor determines that a sick person would no longer wish to be alive and so terminates his or her life for the person who is unable to do it himself.

There are many sorrowful stories of people living with serious medical conditions, living in pain, or living in a persistent vegetative state and no longer able to communicate. These stories tug at our sense of fairness. Why should we force these people to live when they no longer want to?

The truth is that the majority of people who choose to take their own lives, or ask others to help them, do so not because their lives are intolerable to themselves, but...
because they feel that they have become intolerable to their loved ones, or that no one wants them to continue living. Depression is a treatable illness and one that many people deal with at different times in life. How horrible it would be if everyone suffering from depression chose to take his or her own life!

As Catholics who know that Eternity awaits us at the end of this life, we have a particular responsibility to share with the culture the perspective that illness, disability, suffering, and dying are a part of living that must be embraced in order to give true dignity to all people, particularly the dying, the sick, and the elderly.

The ending of a person’s life is something to be taken very seriously. Catholic teaching, and the moral code used by most nations and religions, states that the only time it is permissible to directly take another human life is for reason of self-defense. Certainly, killing an ill patient, either through assisted-suicide or euthanasia, can not be called self-defense.

Rather, it is the responsibility of the medical community, the family, and the larger community to ensure that every person receives the medical care that is most appropriate to heal, preserve, and support life. At the time of death, when bodily systems begin to break down, certain difficult decisions to remove medical care sometimes must be made because the care itself is hurting the patient. However, there remains always the obligation to treat the person with dignity, providing comfort and love always and food and water as long as is possible.

This responsibility to support the most vulnerable human lives is not restricted solely to the elderly and dying. It also extends to people with disabilities or special needs, many of whom are deemed less worthy of life than others. Today, 90% of parents who receive a prenatal diagnosis of Down Syndrome for their unborn child choose to abort their babies.

Families play an important role in changing the culture’s view of those with special needs or disabilities, those who are sick or dying, and the elderly. Within families, members support their loved ones who are in most need of help. This offers a visual model to the world that every human life has inherent dignity and must be loved, nurtured, supported, and defended.

Who do you know whose life is considered vulnerable? A great-grandparent? A cousin or sibling with special needs? A neighbor battling cancer? How do you show them that they are loved unconditionally because they are children of God?

What would you say to someone who favored letting the sick or elderly have help dying or be put to death if they wanted to? What if the sick person was a teenager? Would that matter? What if he was an infant born with a genetic disease? What if she was your grandmother? Does dignity diminish with illness or infirmity?

I ... reaffirm strongly that the intrinsic value and personal dignity of every human being do not change, no matter what the concrete circumstances of his or her life. A man, even if seriously ill or disabled in the exercise of his highest functions, is and always will be a man, and he will never become a “vegetable” or an “animal”.

Even our brothers and sisters who find themselves in the clinical condition of a “vegetative state” retain their human dignity in all its fullness. The loving gaze of God the Father continues to fall upon them, acknowledging them as his sons and daughters, especially in need of help.

—Saint John Paul II
Loneliness can take many forms. There is the loneliness of being left out when friends plan an activity without you. There is the loneliness of going away to college and not knowing anyone on campus. Then, there is the loneliness of being someone forgotten and overlooked by the rest of the world. The elderly lady peeking through her curtains as people walk by on the street. The man in the wheelchair whom everyone whizzes past. The autistic child who cannot adequately communicate with his family. The unborn child diagnosed with Trisomy 13 whose parents want an abortion. What can we do to break down the barriers of loneliness?

Ruby’s Story

I had never been comfortable going to an "old folk’s home", with the smells, and sad sight of seeing the lonely elderly sitting around staring off in space. It did not seem like a place I would ever want to be. Since “care for the elderly” was part of our Respect Life Ministry at the parish, I tried to find anyone else to take this on. I couldn’t. I knew I had to roll up my sleeves and get committed.

I started out with just little things. First, we would give the patients hand massages and take them out for strolls in the fresh air in their wheelchairs. My son Kai accompanies me during school vacations and makes the seniors “light up” with his smile and tender touch.

I first met Ruby when I started volunteering at the Ocean Villa Senior Home. She was in a wheelchair and could not speak, but I could tell she really wanted to communicate with me. I remember looking into her eyes and telling her "I know you have a lot to say and I can see in your heart how passionate you are about it." She never stopped trying to share with me over the months we would spend together, and I loved that. I would just sit quietly with her and allow her to share with me any way she could.

We recently went on a 4 week family vacation. When I returned on our usual Wednesday, Isabelle, the floor nurse, asked if I could pray for Ruby in her room because she was dying. I said absolutely, and took the other volunteers with me and prayed over dear, sweet Ruby. She was hooked up to the oxygen machine and looked as if she would pass at any moment. She responded to the prayers by trying to move her head forward. I did not expect to see her again as she was so far gone.

I called daily to check on her. Isabelle told me Ruby’s family was not coming. They had already come to say their goodbyes and had hired a nurse to sit with her instead. But, Ruby was not gone yet. She was only accompanied by a nurse she did not even know. I could not believe how she strained to hold on to life.

Friday came, and she was still here. I asked other people from our parish to visit Ruby also, and to bring flowers and their children. Someone needed to visit Ruby in her last days to make her feel loved.

I couldn't believe when I called on Sunday Ruby was still hanging on. I prayed for her, lit a candle at Mass, and went for a visit. When I opened the door I saw Ruby laying there in the same position just looking even worse. I prayed to the Holy Spirit, asking what Ruby needed to let go peacefully. I felt a tug on my heart that it was about forgiveness. I read the Bible to her, sang songs to her, prayed the rosary, and told her Jesus was waiting for her along with her friends and family that had passed, with wide open arms and that she was forgiven for all things and it was time to go home. I could see in Ruby’s eyes that she was listening to every word I said. I don’t even know whether Ruby was Christian, but she was listening.

She died that evening. I felt so privileged to be part of her sacred journey home to Heaven. Far from being squeamish with elderly people, I have since decided to expand the ministry at the Senior Home to include being with the dying so that they are not alone in this important transition home to God.

Words cannot express the great joy, love and happiness working with my seniors has given me. I look forward to it every week!

We are all handicapped in one way or another.... Sometimes it can be seen on the outside; sometimes it is on the inside.

—Blessed Teresa of Calcutta
Open your heart to life means:

"Open your heart to life means trying to understand what God is saying to me."
Elizabeth, age 17

"Open your heart to life means being more open to new people you meet."
Jackson, age 13

"I open my heart to life when I see someone in need and do a simple thing to help them."
Francesca, age 15

John Paul II (then Pope, now Saint) coined the phrase “culture of life” at World Youth Day in Denver, CO in 1993. He defined it this way, “The Culture of Life means respect for nature and protection of God's work of creation. In a special way, it means respect for human life from the first moment of conception until its natural end.”

Since then the term Culture of Life has become the title for the world we wish to build based on the principles in the Gospel of love, peace, and forgiveness. The Culture of Life is one that embraces each individual and supports each individual to thrive and become the best person he or she can be from the first moment of conception, throughout life, to the final moments of death. It also, necessarily, means the end of actions that destroy or demean life.

The Bishops of the United States have offered this challenge to America, “We live the (Culture) of Life when we live in solidarity with the poor of the world, standing up for their lives and dignity. Yet abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others. They are committed against those who are weakest and most defenseless, those who are genuinely ‘the poorest of the poor.’ They are endorsed increasingly without the veil of euphemism, as supporters of abortion and euthanasia freely concede these are killing even as they promote them. Sadly, they are practiced in those communities which ordinarily provide a safe haven for the weak — the family and the healing professions. Such direct attacks on human life, once crimes, are today legitimized by governments sworn to protect the weak and marginalized.”

Will you commit to building a Culture of Life in your family, your neighborhood, your school?
What will that look like? What will be your first step? Are there other people you know who will join you in this project?
How will you know when you have been successful? What will have changed? What will have gotten better?
What can I do?

Host a Wheelchair Sunday at your Parish. Work with the Knights of Columbus Council in your parish to raise money to give wheelchairs to needy people in the US and internationally. You can’t imagine what a difference a wheelchair can make in someone’s life!

Volunteer at your local retirement home or convalescent hospital. Start small by stopping by to visit residents. Bring them flowers or cookies. Offer to push them outside to take a walk in the fresh air. Bring them drawings or photos to hang on their walls. Always call ahead to ask what is allowed and when is the best time to visit. Homes for seniors are all over, but here are a few suggestions:

Nazareth House in Los Angeles
http://www.nazarethhouse.org

St. John of God in Los Angeles
http://stjohnofgodseniors.org

Where Can I Learn More?

- National Catholic Partnership on Disability:
  www.ncpd.org

- Not Dead Yet—A group of people with special needs speaking on behalf of life; not euthanasia:
  www.notdeadyet.org

- US Bishops on Euthanasia:

Prayer To Respect the Dignity of Every Human Life

That the life of every human person, from conception to natural death, might be enshrined and protected in our laws; We pray to the Lord.

For the children who are unwanted by their parents, that God’s grace might send others to love and care for them; We pray to the Lord.

For those who have lost hope, and especially for those condemned to die, that we might work to save their lives; We pray to the Lord.

For all unborn children: that our love for them may keep them safe until the joyous day of their birth; We pray to the Lord.

For those who have grown very old, and especially for those tempted to die, that God might grant them patient endurance to do his will and serve his Gospel; We pray to the Lord.

For all who are lonely or afraid, for teenagers on the street, old people in nursing homes, prisoners with no one to visit them, and all whom the world has forgotten: that Christ might lead us to them; We pray to the Lord.

What is being done in our community?

The Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles are called by God to be a presence inflamed within our world, witnessing to God’s love through prayer, joyful witness, and loving service. The Sisters run Santa Teresita in Duarte, a professional nursing, rehabilitative and care-giving home for seniors.

Santa Teresita is “At the Service of the Family for Life”, surrounding the cherished seniors with loving care and empowering their lives with vibrancy, purpose and fulfillment. This is the mission of the sisters, rooted in values of unwavering commitment and steadfast adherence to the moral and ethical teachings of the Catholic Church.

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