

Homily 31st Sunday Ordinary Time 2024

'I have carved you in the palm of my hand!' (Isaiah 49:16)

As we enter the month of November, the month of the Holy Souls, my attention turns to the great dignity of the human person, created 'in the image and likeness of God' and the threat to that dignity by the medically assisted suicide Bill currently going through Parliament. We all remember the so called guarantees offered by the 1967 Abortion Act but the reality is that these guarantees have not been honoured and we have had a 'foot in the door' situation as campaigners for women's rights and other advocates of a so called secular society continue to push the door open. I fear, as night follows day, that the same 'wedge argument' will be used in the event of the passing of a medically assisted suicide Act by Parliament.

The dignity of the dying person is evident in the rites of The Catholic Church. When the person becomes ill, the local priest will attend the person at home or hospital and celebrate The Sacrament of The Sick, a tradition which goes back to St James in The Early Church. 'If someone's sick among you, call the elders of the community to anoint them and invoke The Lord for healing. The priest enters the house with the words, 'Peace be on this house and those who dwell in it.' He then goes to the sick person, prays over them, anoints them with the healing oil of the sick, hears their confession of sins and in the name of Jesus absolves them. Of course, there are times when a sickness leads to death and when death is imminent, the tone of The Sacrament turns to the 'Viaticum', the 'Food for The Journey' and the dying person will also receive Holy Communion. What care, what beauty, what dignity The Sacred Liturgy affords the dying.

This great dignity is then afforded to the mortal remains of the dead. Traditionally, in families of Irish heritage, though not exclusively, the body of the dead person is dressed in white garments and the open coffin lies in state in the home. Family and friends gather each of three evenings to pray The Holy Rosary. This is usually led by the local priest, as the deceased journey back to The Father. People then pray individually at the open coffin and retire to share memories of the dead person over a cup of tea or something stronger. What care, what beauty, what dignity these sacred 'rites' afford the dead person.

The night before The Requiem Mass the coffin is transported to the parish church, usually in procession through the streets of the local community where people of faith and no faith will stop to acknowledge with great respect the person's passing. In reaching the threshold of the church the coffin is solemnly carried by relatives and friends to lie in state overnight in the church surrounded by four flickering candles. The family, friends and parish community again pray for the dead person. Some go to confess their sins in order to worthily receive the Eucharist the following day. What care, what beauty, what dignity these sacred 'rites' afford the dead person.

The following day, The community of believers celebrate The Requiem Mass. The Mass itself is the RELIVING of The Passion. Death and Resurrection of Jesus when we are truly present, through signs and symbols, at The Last Supper AND The Heavenly Banquet of The Lamb where the angels, saints and those who have gone before us in the sign of faith also praise and thank God. The priest, before Mass begins, sprinkles the coffin with holy water and places symbols of the dead person's faith on the casket,

usually a personal crucifix and Bible. After Holy Communion the community witnesses The Final Commendation and the coffin is again sprinkled with holy water and incensed by the priest as the choir and assembly invoke the angels and the saints to welcome the dead person into paradise. What beauty and dignity The Sacred Liturgy affords the dead.

The coffin is then carried to its place of rest by relatives and friends. Prayers are said at the graveside or crematorium. The person's mortal remains are again sprinkled with holy water and the coffin is lowered by family members into the grave (or touched one by one by the mourners as the process by the coffin at a cremation). What beauty, what dignity these sacred rites afford the dead.

You might say, yes but all of that is gone! This is true in many cases, but one has to ask the question, 'WHY?' Perhaps the answer lies in the theory that we as Catholics have been seduced by a secularism which sees the sick and dying in economic terms and our respect for the sick and dying has been unconsciously eroded by a society which is arguably increasingly selfish and economically motivated.

Dame Cecily Saunders, the pioneer and founder of the hospice movement, took a radically different approach to 'society's' view of the terminally ill and dying, promoting quality of life, pain management and the dignity of the dying till natural death. In so doing hospices have enriched the lives, not only of the terminally ill but of all those who care for them and indeed all of us who stand in awe and admiration of hospice doctors, nurses and ancillary staff as they show us what it means to be a compassionate human being. We Christians must choose to follow the example of Dame Cecily, so beautifully reflected in The Liturgy of The Sick, Dying and The Dead, and in so doing uphold our belief that each human person, till natural death, should be treated as persons 'made in the image and likeness of God'. The medically assisted suicide Bill directly challenges our innate dignity as daughters and sons of God,