

## "A Cause for Reflection"

January 22, 2014

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Earlier this week an article appeared on the Editorial Page of this paper about a case in Texas concerning a mother's death, the continued life of her child, the law, and the preferred choices of both mother and father. I found the article more inciting, aimed to excite an emotional response from those of the same mind, than insightful. Clearly, I must also have disagreed with part or all of the article, otherwise I would not be responding to it. Since this week marks the March for Life, I also wanted to say something about the preciousness of life and the criteria for good choices.

The first thing that must be said, given that the Muñoz case involves hospitals, courts, and therefore HIPAA, is that we don't have before us all the facts. We also do not have a necessarily final judgement by the court as to whether laws have been appropriately applied. We do have two unique human beings, genetically speaking, one living and one dead (according to the best standards of our day when properly applied.) The living one is totally dependent upon a mother whose body is being kept functioning by life support, although the part that holds everything together (her brain) shows a decisive lack of measurable activity. Her husband, the father of the child, believes she would not wish to be in this state. The relevant laws of the state have been applied in a way which conflicts with those wishes. The key passages of those laws were apparently formulated by a Texas Democrat, whether pro-life or not, I know not.

The case is a conundrum and, like all conundrums provides an opportunity for self and societal examination. The advancement of our medical sciences allows for wonderful and terrible consequences at times. Prolonging life and prolonging death are both possible. There must be an interplay between law and medicine to protect both the patient and the doctor from misusing technologies intended to heal. That being said, doctor and patient need also to be free to deal with the variety of the human condition, which does not always respond to treatment as expected. The human body is a wonder more complex than our current understanding. There are necessary parameters which must be respected, though, and these can and ought to be codified in the face of evident abuse.

Another element that makes this case difficult is the interplay between wishes and reality. No one wishes for this situation, and that makes it difficult to plan for. The wife wouldn't have wished to be kept alive on a machine. The husband may not want another baby to care for in the aftermath. The state may wish to aid every vulnerable human being. Medical science may wish to substitute for months of natural gestation in an emergency. The insurance company or the hospital may not want to spend any more money. All of these statements are in one way or another speculative in the face of the real situation of a tiny baby, a sudden calamitous event, and the tremendous life and death decisions which are being made thoughtfully or thoughtlessly. The question which makes life worth living is not, "what do I want?" but "what is good?" When the two are in agreement, the choice is easy. When the two are at odds, we must examine our motives, our reasoning, and even our beliefs. We all believe that some things are good, but we must determine whether we consider the right things good.

With one exception, I have not used names in this article. For good or ill, I have done so out of respect for those involved. I do not wish to play upon sentiment, but that is not to say that I wish to sanitize this reflection. The real people involved are really facing painful circumstances. The family and friends will mourn. The child in the womb will face the consequences of these decisions, too. This should bring us to prayer; we ought to pray for everyone involved, that the best decisions may be made. This situation should bring us to remember death and our own state in life. It should bring us to reflection on how we value our neighbors, our family, our lives and the lives of those around us. It should also bring us to politics, our common reflection on the good we should do and the best way to accomplish that. Then we return to prayer: God help us!