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A Victory for Life in Florida: Will it Stand?

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Terri Schiavo has been in a state of mental incapacitation since she suffered a massive heart failure 13 years ago. Since that time, some medical experts have argued that she is in a "persistent vegetative state," or PVS. Other experts have argued strongly that Terri is not correctly diagnosed as suffering in a PVS, but is able to respond to commands, show emotional reactions, and recognize family.

Terri's husband, Michael Schiavo, has been locked in a battle with her parents, Bob and Mary Schindler. Michael, who had at first pledged to keep his marriage vows and support Terri "in sickness and in health," actually accepted a million dollar settlement in a lawsuit filed on her behalf, and then refused to spend the funds as promised to further Terri's treatment.

To the contrary, he has denied her treatment, even for matters as necessary as antibiotics for infections. For the last several years he has waged a legal battle to order the death of his wife, even as he had one child by his girlfriend and is now expecting another.

The sad case of Terri Schiavo is a poignant sign of the advance of the Culture of Death and the impact of its logic on the nation's conscience. The liberal elites have embraced the euthanasia movement and are ready to define life in terms of its perceived "meaningfulness." These are the same people who believe that a woman has a fundamental right to abort the unborn life within her. They also believe that life should be measured by its "quality" rather than its objective sanctity.

The editorial response to the Governor's action is a revelation in itself. The Miami Herald declared that "by ordering Terri Schiavo's feeding tube reinserted, the Governor and legislature have provoked a constitutional crisis, substituted a hasty legislative order for years of court rulings; defied sound medical judgment; and made a mockery of Florida's Right-to-Privacy and Death-with-Dignity laws." The New York Times charged that the legislature and Governor have "mocked the courts' careful deliberations and embarked on a ghoulish medical journey by directing that her feeding resume." The Louisville Courier-Journal asserted: "The true villains have been the self-serving grandstanders who interfered to turn private agony into political theater."

The New York Times went so far as to argue that "true respect for life includes recognizing not just when it exists, but when it ceases to be meaningful." Evidently, The New York Times believes that it, along with others in the liberal elite, have the right to decide when life is adequately "meaningful."

The legal charade presented by Michael Schiavo continues to have its enablers in the media. The New York Times concluded its editorial by stating that decisions about the end of life should be based upon "the wishes, as best they can be determined, of the individual whose life is at issue." That is a fascinating statement, made all the more ludicrous by the fact that Terri Schiavo left no written instructions and the only individuals who have claimed that she would have wanted

her life to end are Michael Schiavo and members of his immediate family.

The most macabre angle to this case is the role of George Felos, Michael Schiavo's attorney. Felos is a well-known euthanasia advocate and he is second to none in his presentation of the "Big Lie" through propaganda. Even Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels would blush at statements made by Felos. Consider this: "The governor of the state of Florida does not have the right to trump a patient's personal choice."

Felos has the audacity to make this statement when he knows full well that Terri Schiavo left no specific instructions. Terri is the patient in this case, not Michael Schiavo. As if that was not bad enough, Felos went on to argue: "It is simply inhumane and barbaric to interrupt her death process. Just because Terri Schiavo is not conscious doesn't mean she doesn't have dignity."

The evil essence of that statement is breathtaking. George Felos claims that those who would save Terri Schiavo's life are "inhumane and barbaric." And he further suggests that their inhumanity is seen in "interrupting" Terri's death process. If this is the ethical standard, then the nation's emergency rooms should be seen as barbaric institutions, where the "death process" of thousands of Americans is interrupted each day.

George Felos is an apostle of the Church of Death. When he claims that Terri Schiavo's dignity should be respected, we must keep in mind that it is this man who has presented the courts with arguments for removing her feeding tube so that she would die of dehydration and starvation—a fate that would not be legally allowed in a veterinary clinic.

Terri has been moved from a Pinellas County hospice to Morton Plant Hospital in Clearwater. The final disposition of her case, of course, is still unclear. According to Felos, Michael Schiavo is currently considering his legal options for appeal. Michael Schiavo continues to ban the Schindler's from visiting Terri, but Governor Bush has appointed a guardian ad litem to investigate the case.

According to press reports, the governor will appoint University of South Florida Medical School professor Jay Wolfson to serve as guardian. Wolfson will have the power to order tests on Terri Schiavo without Michael Schiavo's permission. Family members are hoping that Terri can eventually be tested for the ability to swallow food.

The Culture of Death has powerful advocates in the courts. The national media rushed to the nation's law schools in order to find those legal "experts" all too ready to denounce the action by Florida's legislature and governor. The Tampa Tribune summarized the legislative action now known as "Terri's Bill" as "profoundly unconstitutional." Harvard Law Professor Laurence Tribe said that the action, "violates the core principles" of the 1990 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Cruzan v. Director, Missouri Department of Health*. "I have never seen a case in which the state legislature treats someone's life as a political football in quite the way this is being done," commented Tribe, who is evidently quite satisfied to have the judges play whatever game they wish when life is at stake.

Beyond this case is the larger issue of end-of-life ethics. One of the most dangerous aspects of this case is the assumption, seemingly held by many on both sides of this debate, that the diagnosis of a persistent vegetative state should be sufficient to withdraw life support. This is a very dangerous assumption and those who contend for the sanctity of human life must be very careful not to base the entire argument on the question of whether or not Terri Schiavo is correctly diagnosed as suffering in a PVS. Once that argument is taken for granted, the diagnosis of a persistent vegetative state will quickly become an automatic death sentence.

No thoughtful person can underestimate the agonizing decisions that are involved in cases like that of Terri Schiavo. Nevertheless, Terri's tragedy is a clear indication of what happens when the Culture of Death goes to court, driven by an eager husband with an attorney ready to serve as an advocate for death.

The Terri Schiavo case isn't over—not by a long shot. For now, those who value the sanctity of human life must be thankful that Florida's legislature and Governor Jeb Bush acted courageously to take a stand for life over against the forces of death. Just don't assume that they will have the last word.

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