

Schiavo drama feeds political frenzy: Important questions for Christians

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As Terri Schiavo drew her final breaths, dozens of praying protesters—and even greater numbers of journalists—massed daily outside her hospice in Pinellas Park, Florida. The crowd changed mostly whenever religious activists—ranging from Randall Terry to Jesse Jackson—showed up to comfort those who grasped at any straw of hope.

The family saga of a severely brain-damaged woman, whose husband and parents differed over whether a feeding tube should be removed or kept in place after 15 years, escalated into a drama with political, ethical and culture-war dimensions.

Differences on how to define the end of life will continue to be aired in legislative halls and religious forums, but the frenzy surrounding Terri Schiavo, 41, ended March 31 with her death 13 days after her feeding tube had been removed.

Thwarted at the state court levels, Schiavo's parents appealed to national political leaders for relief, getting senators and House members back to Washington to pass a bill, signed by President Bush, asking for remedies in federal courts. In quick order, federal courts rejected the cry to "save Terri," and the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review the case.

Bush had said the government "should have a presumption in favor of life" in cases where there are disputes over the removal of life-sustaining means. And House Republican Leader Tom DeLay of Texas called removing Schiavo's feeding tube—which would dehydrate and starve her—"an act of barbarism" and "murder."

But critics saw the political maneuvers as hypocritical, and public opinion polls tended to show that most Americans wanted the end-of-life decisions left to family members and their physicians.

Several media outlets reported on a law that Bush signed in 1999 while he was governor of Texas. It allows physicians to overrule family members' wishes in cases

in which continuing life-support is deemed “futile” and the patient has no chance of recovering. On March 15, as a result of the law, six-month-old Sun Hudson died in his mother’s arms at a Houston hospital.

Also, the *Los Angeles Times* reported March 27 that DeLay agreed in 1988 with a family decision to decline “extraordinary” measures to keep alive his father, who sustained severe brain damage in a freak accident. A spokesman for DeLay said the ethics of the two situations are quite different. Sun Hudson was removed from a respirator. The DeLay family chose not to have Charles DeLay attached to a dialysis machine after his kidneys failed.

Repeatedly, Florida courts and state-appointed medical experts found that Terri Schiavo was essentially brain-dead or in a “persistent vegetative state” from which she would not recover and that, though she left no written directive or “living will,” previous statements she had made to her husband and other family members and friends indicated she would not want to be kept alive in such a condition.

Perhaps the first ethical question is this: Is there a moral distinction between removing a feeding tube and removing other means of life support?

Catholic leaders, including the Vatican and U.S. bishops, have taken firm positions in Schiavo’s case. (Coincidentally, Pope John Paul II had a plastic feeding tube inserted into his body March 30 to bring nourishment directly to his stomach because he had trouble swallowing.)

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C., said the March 18 court-ordered removal of Schiavo’s feeding tube was a “form of euthanasia.” Others have disagreed, saying that the church has been against “extraordinary means” to prolong life. For instance, editors of the lay Catholic-published *Commonweal* magazine wrote in its April 8 issue: “The mere prolongation of bodily functions where there is no hope of recovery and where the patient has no ability to realize human or personal goods is not obligatory.”

Even among Southern Baptist educators and ethicists there is disagreement. “I’ve talked to some very theologically conservative medical providers who think it’s OK to remove some feeding tubes,” said David Smolin, a professor of law at Samford University in Alabama.

“The fundamental underlying ethical issue is whether or not a feeding tube is something that should be similar to [normal] feeding, which should never be withheld unless the person is going to suffer from the treatment . . . or like something to assist breathing, like a heart-lung machine,” said Smolin. He indicated he takes a “pro-life point of view that says a feeding tube is feeding and should never be withdrawn.”

Dixon Sutherland of Stetson University in Florida disagrees. Noting that Schiavo could not feed herself, chew or swallow, Sutherland, who directs the Institute for Christian Ethics at the Baptist-related school, said that a feeding tube is not morally distinguishable from other means of life support. “It’s no less artificial than a respirator—what would make it less artificial?” he asked.

Whatever the ethical legitimacy of sustaining Schiavo’s life, Sutherland said, the case raises an important question for Christians: Do churches do enough to minister to those facing the end of their lives or the lives of their loved ones?

“I think it is a great disservice that the church has not pursued end-of-life issues,” he said. “The church in general—and I’m not saying every church—but I know very few churches that have taken this on as a serious issue that they educate parishioners about and make it a part of their ministry.”

What churches should not do, he argued, is advocate for sustaining life the way Schiavo’s parents and their supporters did. “They’re not erring on the side of life here; they’re erring on the side of death defiance,” he said.

“They’re seeking immortality instead of talking about the resurrected life,” he said. “Terri Schiavo was dead a long time ago; it’s just a matter of being clinically dead that’s the issue here. And a position that holds that the sacredness of life extends until clinical death occurs is bankrupt.” *-based on an American Baptist Press story*