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Press Release

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National Catholic Partnership on Disability Highlights Differences Between Two Neurologically Disabled Individuals

Washington, DC – July 10, 2003: The National Catholic Partnership on Disabilities (NCPD) was gratified by the news that Terry Wallis' awoke from a coma after 19 years. Executive director, Mary Jane Owen noted: "Whether one considers this a miracle or evidence that the body can heal itself over time, the fact is that our knowledge of what is possible for people with neurological disabilities is limited and the role of negative judgments of the value of a given life can result in devaluation of those of us who live with disabilities. Terry, a young man injured in a car accident, was fortunate to have a family who never gave up; that took him on visits even when he was unresponsive; who continued to celebrate holidays with him. The contrast between what happened to Mr. Wallis is in stark contrast to the other Terri – the unfortunate wife of Michael Schiavo. He has done everything possible to prevent her family from interacting with her and has insisted that her feeding tube be withdrawn. Death by starvation and dehydration has been the goal for Terri Schiavo."

In July, 1984, Terry Wallis was injured in a car accident which killed the friend with whom he was traveling. In February, 1990, Terri Schiavo suffered cardiac arrest which cut off oxygen to her brain for several minutes. Both became neurologically disabled; Terry going into coma while Terri has continued to respond in limited ways according to her parents and siblings, who have faced repeated rejection by the court system in Florida to intervene to assure basic medical care or appropriate rehabilitation for Terri.

In November 1992, in a trial involving medical malpractice, her husband, Michael Schiavo, requested \$20 million for Terri's future medical needs. He assured the jury, which awarded \$9,400,000.00 for Terri's medical care and rehabilitation, that he would take care of Terri, "in a heartbeat. . . . She's my life and I wouldn't trade her for the world. I believe in my wedding vows." The malpractice jury also awarded Michael \$640,000 for loss of consortium of his wife.

Less than a year later Mr. Schiavo initiated the first of a long series of threats to his wife's well being. At his request hydration and nutrition were terminated for 48 hours and were continued only because of her family's intervention. Such "treatment," if continued, would have resulted in Terri's death. This in spite of video-tapes of her interactions and responses which would seem to indicate she is not in a persistent vegetative state. Currently the only accommodation she is receiving as a neurologically disabled individual is tube feeding.

A 1991 medical report about Terri's condition was not released at the insistence of Mr. Schiavo. Only recently has the information contained in that transcript been available. The unnamed physician who reviewed that nuclear imaging bone scan found evidence of 'multiple fractures.' 'Somebody worked her over real good.'

Janice Benton, a staff member of NCPD, illustrated how dissimilar the two cases are: "The Wallis family has been rewarded for their faith and patience. Rather than fighting for death for their loved one, wife Sandi, daughter Amber, parents Angilee and Jerry, and brother Perry kept up a loving vigil, even as years turned to decades. They didn't presume to know what was best for Terry, or to make judgments of his 'quality of life.' We can only hope that the witness of this loving family will guide other families and judges who find themselves faced with a similar situation. We would do well to heed their advice to 'keep the faith and never give up'."

NCPD had earlier requested that the Florida legal system protect those funds originally designated for Terri's rehabilitation. They have been drastically depleted with little regard to the purpose intended. Instead the money has been used in pursuit of legal and medical testimony from well-known advocates of euthanasia. Michael has moved on with his life with little apparent adherence to the commitments he made to the court in 1992.

Nancy Thompson, Chair of the Board of NCPD reflected, "Unfortunately the Schiavo case is one of too many in recent months in which the guardians of people with neurological disabilities have the potential to gain financially from the termination of basic medical care and potentially helpful rehabilitation."

Owen, a disability advocate since 1972 added, "A particularly frightening outcome of the battle between Mr. Schiavo and his live-in girlfriend and Terri's family and friends is the statement by Attorney George J. Felos. In August 2001 he said in describing Terri's quality of life: "The litmus test is whether a person can bring a spoon to their own mouth." That "litmus test" for survival could not have been passed by many of my friends who live productively in spite of significant disabilities. And those of us who live with assorted disabilities are aware that when any of us is deprived of their essential dignity and worth, each of us face that same discounting by the judgments of the culture of death."

Mr. Rus Wester, who writes for the Catholic press, emphasized this point: "Let's pray that someone, perhaps many, in the media, will develop the story of Terry Wallis in such a way that the true message is conveyed. Whether we call what has happened within the Wallis family a miracle or just a fluke of nature, may heaven grant sufficient clarity in the reporting of such cases that we learn respect for ALL human life."

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NCPD was established in 1982 to advocate for welcome and justice for people with disabilities and their families within the Catholic Church and their communities.