

Catholic Disability Leaders Decry Federal Appeals Court Ruling Against Terri Schiavo

Washington, D.C. March 25, 2005 – Representatives of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) denounced this morning’s federal court ruling denying the reinsertion of Terri Schiavo’s feeding tube. “This is a sad day for all Americans, when the law of the land compels a federal court to deny life to a woman because of her significant brain injury” stated Dr. Nancy Thompson, Chair of NCPD’s Board of Directors.

NCPD has spoken out on behalf of Ms. Schiavo and her parents since the beginning of their struggle. NCPD Executive Director, Janice Benton, explains: “We recognized that Terri’s life was being judged by her husband and the courts on the basis of their perception of her ‘quality of life.’ Here was a young woman disabled by brain injury. She is not terminally ill, nor kept alive by artificial life support systems such as a respirator. She breathes on her own. Had she received over these past years the therapy denied to her by her husband, despite the significant jury award to pay for such therapy, this whole debate might be moot.” Cardinal Francis George, NCPD Episcopal Moderator, commented, “This case is not about letting a terminally-ill woman die a natural death. It is about ending the life of a person with a significant disability prematurely by withdrawing the most basic elements that sustain each human life—food and water. It is a deliberate act which will result in Terri Schiavo’s death.”

NCPD Board member Daniel Avila, Associate Director for Policy and Research of the Massachusetts Catholic Conference, notes that, “Terri left no written directive. In the absence of such a written directive the courts have relied on Mr. Schiavo’s claim that she stated that she wouldn’t want to live this way. This claim is disputed, and we will never know the truth of Terri’s wishes. To avoid such problems, we encourage each person to sign a medical directive that is consistent with the Church’s teachings.” Ms. Benton adds, “We wish to express our gratitude to President Bush and Congress for their efforts on Ms. Schiavo’s behalf. They offered her a second chance on life. We encourage future non-partisan efforts to support the culture of life in a consistent manner. While it is noble to defend life when it is threatened with extinction through abortion or euthanasia, it is likewise noble to defend it by funding the programs that allow people with disabilities to live in dignity with needed services and supports.”

Dr. Michael Degnan, NCPD Board member and Professor of Philosophy at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, who is paraplegic, concludes, “In the

end, the federal courts may not rule in Terri's favor for they may be precluded from reconsidering the legitimacy of Michael Schiavo's claim that removal of the means of food and water are what Terri would have wanted. The Congressional act that directed the Federal courts to consider the case may be deemed unconstitutional. If so, our legal system will have followed its course. But justice for Terri Schiavo and her family will not have been realized.”

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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. For further commentaries on Terri Schiavo see www.ncpd.org.