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Catholic Hospitals Await Word on Implementing Pope's Euthanasia Remarks

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The Vatican ([LifeNews.com](http://www.lifenews.com)) -- Comments made by the Pope late last month that health care providers are morally obligated to provide food and water to disabled patients or those in a persistent vegetative state are drawing various responses from Catholic health providers and praise from pro-life groups.

Expanding on the Catholic Church's pro-life policies on assisted suicide and euthanasia, the Pope said removing the feeding tube of a disabled patient is immoral and amounts to "euthanasia by omission."

Pope John Paul II also said that the lexicon used to describe such patients -- as being in a "vegetative state" was degrading and inhuman.

The Catholic Health Association responded to the Pope's remarks in a carefully worded statement.

The medical group said the Pope's message "reminds us of our responsibility never to abandon the sick or dying."

"That being said, the guidance contained in his remarks has significant ethical, legal, clinical, and pastoral implications that must be carefully considered. This will require dialogue among sponsors, bishops, and providers, especially with regard to practical implications for those patients who are not in a persistent vegetative state," such as Terri Schiavo.

According to the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, most pro-life observers say Catholic health care agencies are

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obligated to continue care for patients like Terri, including providing food and water through a feeding tube, as the Pope encouraged.

CHA claims the directives require limiting care for some patients, saying, "it has been widely accepted among Catholic moralists from the sixteenth century onward that one need only employ 'ordinary' means of preserving life, but not those deemed 'extraordinary.'"

But, Nancy Valko, a representative of Nurses for Life and a leading monitor of end-of-life issues, says the directives "argue for the presumption of feeding" and that they "have long been reinterpreted by CHA ethicists as allowing withdrawal of feedings from the so-called 'vegetative.'"

"This situation is exactly what the Pope's statement contradicts and hopefully CHA will accept this," Valko said.

It could be months before the 600 Catholic hospitals in the U.S. receive clear instructions on how the Pope's statement applies to them. His message does not carry the authority of a papal encyclical.

However, the Pope's view on patients like Terri seems clear from his comments, which were made at a meeting of leading Catholic medical officials in Rome.

"A man, even if seriously sick or prevented in the exercise of its higher functions, is and will be always a man ... [he] will never become a 'vegetable' or an 'animal,'" the Pope said. "The intrinsic value and personal dignity of every human being does not change depending on their circumstances."

His comments drew praise from pro-life organizations.

"The Holy Father's speech is a ringing defense of the dignity of each and every human being, regardless of disabilities -- including the patient in a 'vegetative state,'" says Richard Doerflinger, who monitors bioethics issues for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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"Because these patients are human persons with lives of inherent value, they should receive the ordinary care due to helpless patients, including medically appropriate and effective means for providing nourishment and fluids," Doerflinger added. "Moreover, society as a whole should provide every assistance to families caring for a loved one in this disabled state."

"His statement provides long-awaited clarity to an issue that has divided ethicists, including Catholic theologians, for many years," Doerflinger concluded.