

FROM THE DESK OF MARY SHARON . . .

Death with dignity—the real model

by Mary Sharon Moore

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If you really want to sell an idea, you have to name it right. Take “Death with Dignity,” the ballot initiative that became Oregon law in 1999, and now the similar Initiative 1000 in Washington state.

Death may be inevitable (well, it is inevitable), but “dignity”—now there’s the fighting word. Never mind that the “dignity” of physician-assisted suicide is the absolute opposite of the inviolable dignity in every stage of life of the human person created in the image of God. We’re speaking of the difference between authentic, God-given dignity and an understanding of self that is misshaped to a far lesser form.

Our premier model of “death with dignity” is Jesus, who, through obedience and radical trust expressed his inestimable worth before his Father even in his dying. The early Christian martyrs—and the countless throngs of Christian martyrs ever since—expressed their inestimable worth before God uniquely in the hideous indignity of their dying.

Dignity in the Christian sense is shaped by obedience, accepting and honoring one’s human finiteness with radical trust in God’s goodness and mercy. Will our dying be pretty? Probably not. Yet dying is one of the undeniable stages and expressions of being

human. End-of-life suffering, when united to the suffering of Jesus, becomes redemptive, a unique expression of our priestly vocation for which we were anointed in Baptism.

“Your life is not your own,” St. Paul soberly reminds us. “You have been purchased, and at a price” (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20)—the price being the blood of Christ Jesus.

My life is not my own. My life belongs entirely to God. I may be tempted to think otherwise, and to act as though some portion of my life were mine and under my control. I am reminded of a phrase attributed to theologian Johannes Metz, “We are so poor that even our poverty is not our own; it too belongs to God.”

This poverty of person and radical trust in God is the Christian claim and the absolute reality that informs our understanding of vocation and of human dignity. God is at liberty to reveal the divine image embedded in my human flesh and spirit in whatever way God desires. Not that God is capricious with my life, but that God’s glory will shine through the cracks, even when the lovely vase at last lies broken.

MARY SHARON MOORE, M.T.S., is founding director of **AWAKENING VOCATIONS**, author of *Touching the Reign of God* (Wipf and Stock, 2009), and creator of the L.A.S.T. Workshop for workteam development. Her work in vocation discernment spans from Church ministry to animating organizations for work that touches the soul of the world. For more, visit www.awakeningvocations.com.

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