

Alfie Evans and Vincent Lambert: no life is without value

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In many cases medicine has to renounce curing, but it must never renounce care. The focus of medical treatment is not the disease but the patient. It's disheartening to conceive a medical treatment aimed at "quality life" instead of promoting and enhancing the "quality of life" in every circumstance, stage and condition of human existence.



Our consciences are stirred by the precarious living conditions of Vincent Lambert, in France, and Alfie Evans, in England, and by the intention of two Courts of Justice to end their life by interrupting nutrition and hydration; despite the fact that the mother and brother of Vincent and the parents of Alfie are opposing their execution, admirably struggling to ensure their loved ones' assistance and treatment.

At the *Regina coeli* prayer on the third Sunday after Easter Pope Francis devoted his attention to both, extending it to "others in different countries who live, at times for a long period, in a serious state of illness, medically assisted for their basic needs", Francis said. The Pope's care and sensitivity is voiced in clear terms, exemplifying thoughts and behaviours that ought to be cherished.

First of all, the Pope did not deny the weakness and the precariousness of these people's lives: "These are delicate situations, very painful and complex," he said. They should not be addressed with a prejudiced or simplistic outlook, but with prudence and discernment. Hence euthanasia and the interruption of therapeutic treatment must not lend to forms of futile medical care, as reaffirmed in Church bioethical teaching.

In some cases renouncing extraordinary and disproportionate treatment procedures is possible and even necessary, thereby paving the way to the natural end of life. However, ordinary and proportional approaches should not be rejected, least of all ensuring nutrition and hydration, namely, the "basic needs", mentioned by the Pope.

The line separating the former from the latter is often evident. But at times, owing the complexity of single cases along with the scope of today's clinical treatments, those lines are blurred and indistinguishable. In this case the ethical approach champions the *favor vitae: in dubio pro vita*. This is all the more true when faced with human and environmental conditions of care and support, as in the cases of Vincent and Alfie, both

supported by a large embrace made of love and care that no High Court will even repeal or contradict.

Over and above that, the Pope reaffirmed the primary value and primordial right of every human being and the attention due in conditions of infirmity and need. Value, solicitude and support encompassed in three words: *dignity, care and respect*: “Every sick person must always be respected in their dignity and cared for in a way suited to their condition, with deep respect for life.” These words highlight the centrality of sick persons in their unique and inviolable “dignity.” A very dignity that prompts “respect”: the singular attention and special care due to the human person who has persistent value as subject, not as object, commodity or means. In a condition of illness, disability, and suffering, such respect takes the shape of “care”, in its twofold understanding as medical care and affective care. “In a way –underlined the Pope – suited to their condition, with the consent of family members, and of other healthcare workers.”

Mindful of the fact that in many cases medicine can renounce cure but it must never renounce care.

The focus of medicine is not the disease but the patient. It's disheartening to conceive a medical treatment aimed at “quality life” instead of promoting and enhancing the “quality of life” in every circumstance, stage and condition of human existence. No life is without value, no life is futile or useless, as declared by London's High Court judge called to rule on the case of Alfie. Indeed, every human life has value inasmuch as it “exists” and not for “the ways in which it exists.”

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