



## A Mother's Prayerful Watch

by Mary Ann Kuharski

I can't imagine what it would be like as a mother to watch your child suffer. Just the routine bruises and breaks my own 13 kids encountered was trauma enough for this mom.

Thankfully, I've been spared the tragedy of facing serious or life-threatening battles that have confronted other parents. I've often wondered where they get their strength.

I'm thinking of three young mothers right in my own parish. One mother's little girl has been struggling for the past several years with recurring cancer. Yet, this mother never ceases to have the most beautiful smile on her face each time I greet her.

Another has a child who is the same age as my granddaughter. Both children are eagerly preparing to receive their First Holy Communion in April. This little girl recently had surgery for a malignant tumor.

When the news broke, our entire parish prayed for the success of the operation and the child's full return to health. When I recently ran into the mom (almost literally) coming out of Mass the other day, it was *she* who reassured me, "We're doing well. Keep the prayers coming!"

I am continually amazed by their courage and faith.

Another mother I know was advised by medical professionals early in her pregnancy to abort her unborn baby, because they had discovered a severe



Mary Schindler, mother of Terri Schiavo, pleads for the life of her daughter

abnormality of the heart through prenatal testing. She and her husband adamantly resisted, saying, "We will have this baby and love him for as long as he lives."

And that is what they did.

Baby Jacob was born and as his mother later wrote, "For six precious hours we held and loved our son until he returned to the Lord in spotless innocence."

Who can explain such courage and strength? Catholics know it as God's loving grace, which carries us through even the worst of ordeals and can serve as a profound witness of faith to others.

In that regard, our entire nation recently witnessed the intense love of a mother and a father who publicly pleaded for the life of their daughter. Mary and Bob Schindler, devout Catholics, objecting to the court ordered starvation of their daughter Terri Schiavo, waged a tireless battle on behalf of their daughter.

They appealed to the Florida legislature and to the Governor. When another court struck down the Florida law enacted by the legislature and the Governor, the Schindlers took their case to the US Congress, to the President, and to the American people.

To be clear, Terri was *never* dying. She was not in a coma, nor was she “hooked up” to ventilators or cumbersome hoses or tubes, as some media reports insinuated.

To the contrary, she led a normal life until age 25, when she incurred an unexplained heart attack (or injury), which robbed her of oxygen, causing severe brain damage. Nevertheless, she communicated with her loving family through eye and sound responses.

According to testimony, the first two years after her injury, Terri received some rehabilitative therapy, was able to swallow, and spoke a few words. She did not, however, undergo extensive testing or even an MRI, which could have determined the severity of her brain injury and prognosis for rehabilitation.

Unable to swallow solid food by mouth, Terri relied on a small feeding tube in her abdomen which provided nourishment directly to her digestive system. The therapy was stopped, and ultimately the feeding tube was removed by court order, at the insistence of her estranged husband, Michael.

With the exception of a teardrop of the Precious Blood at Easter, she was allowed no food or fluids. During the last days before her death, her parents pleaded for her to at least be allowed to receive daily Communion. This request, too, was denied by Michael Schiavo and the courts.

In the end, Terri waged her own personal battle, living for nearly 14 days before dying of starvation and dehydration on Thursday of Easter Week.

Much has been said and written about this case and the insistence of her husband Michael to end her life by the removal of her feeding tube. This, in spite of her parents’ objections and their willingness to accept full responsibility for her care. My comments here will be restricted to Church teaching and our roles as Christians to care for one another.

Our Catholic faith teaches that each and every human being, born and unborn, is made in the image of God and therefore deserving of dignity and respect—no matter what their condition, age, or state in life.

In 2001 the USCCB issued a document, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, which states that: “There should be a presumption in favor of providing nutrition and hydration to all patients, including patients who require medically assisted nutrition and hydration, as long as this is of sufficient benefit to outweigh the burdens involved to the patient.”

Thus, it is always morally wrong to deny food and water to *cause* a person’s death. That is the *real* issue with the Terri Schiavo case. That is why her mother, and father, and hundreds of thousands of others pleaded for life on her behalf.

The American Catholic bishops also spoke out, and in my own Minneapolis/St. Paul archdiocese, the Franciscan Brothers of Peace arranged a prayer vigil on Terri’s behalf. At the service, Archbishop Harry Flynn reminded the 1,500 people who attended, “If Terri is allowed to starve to death by the order of the courts, it will open the floodgates to court-ordered euthanasia for the severely disabled and non-productive persons. . . . This case is the ‘Roe vs. Wade’ of the euthanasia movement.”

Pope John Paul II was also quoted by the Archbishop on disability: “A person, even if seriously sick, or prevented from the exercise of a higher purpose, is and will always be a person. He will never be a vegetable or an animal.” (Ironically, our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, who recently underwent a tracheotomy, had a feeding tube inserted when Schiavo was in her 12th day of starvation.)

I have never met Mary or Bob Schindler, but judging by their faith and courage, I am sure that they also took their case to the Blessed Mother herself, who knows only too well what it is like to helplessly watch as the child you love is made to suffer and die.

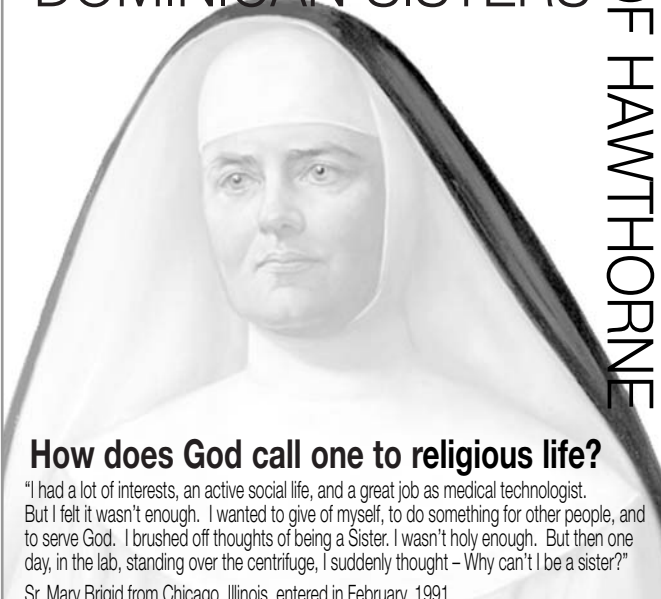
We grieve for Terri’s family and for our nation, which permitted this inhumane act against such a vulnerable, disabled woman.

May God welcome Terri Schiavo home and heal our troubled land.

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.* ■

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