Homily regarding the Assisted Suicide initiative
Rev. Paul R. Pluth © 2008

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For the last ten years of her life on earth, my mom slipped further and further into the fog of Alzheimer's, which was difficult for her because she knew what was happening. My dad made the conscious decision to have Mom stay at home, and to take Mom out to restaurants and social gatherings, which was not always easy or peaceful for him, but was also a joy just to have Mom with him and us.

One day, a colleague of my dad said to him, "I bet you'll be relieved when your wife dies." My father had been a pilot in the Army Air Corps during World War II, and the personal pilot for a well-known general—and he had the personality to go with that. No one had ever called my dad meek, reserved or quiet. When his colleague said, "I bet you'll be relieved when your wife dies," Dad looked at him and said, "On the contrary. When I cut up her meat and feed her dinner, she knows I'm there. When I kneel by her bed at night, and take her hands and say our prayers, she knows I'm there. I want to keep her alive and with me as long as I can. *I wouldn't trade these days for anything.*"

My mom and dad had down days during those ten years, days of tears and frustrations and pain. But my dad would be the first to say that through those years he discovered, they discovered, something greater than those tears and frustrations and pain. I don't know that Dad ever realized what a witness Mom and he were to that something greater, but they were a witness. I remember stopping by the restaurant to which my dad took my mom every week, and the wife of the couple who owned the restaurant saying to me, "To watch what your father does for your mother week after week,"—and then she paused, because she was crying, then went on—"I only hope my husband will care for me the same way." My mom remained with us until the day my father died—and then, sensing that loving presence gone from her life, Mom died just a few days later.

Today I come to talk about something very controversial—the assisted suicide initiative proposed for the November ballot in Washington, for which signatures are being gathered to place it on the ballot. The assisted suicide initiative sounds so reasonable, so humane, so kind. That is its seduction. In truth, the assisted suicide initiative is utterly contrary to our Christian

belief on life, the source of life, and the worth of life. We are not talking about the relieving of pain. We are not talking about refraining from going to extraordinary measures to prolong existence. We are talking about helping someone take his or her own life. The viewpoint behind the assisted suicide initiative is one of autonomy: I am in control; not God but I am the one who is in charge of my life. The viewpoint behind the assisted suicide initiative is a utilitarian view of life: a life only has worth if it has utility, if it has an obviously useful purpose. If not, that life is not necessary, perhaps not even worth living. And Americans are very utilitarian.

On the contrary, we Christians believe that every life has value because we are each created by God. Those human lives, in all their complexity and fragility, those lives have a worth that is rooted in us as human beings, part of our very being: that worth can never be lost. A worth that comes from beyond us by our creation as a gift at the hand of God. A worth not based on our perceived utility or any obvious usefulness, but instead a worth based on the fact that our existence, our life, meant so much to God that he made us. As a 3rd grader responded when I asked her class why should we be good to bad people—"Because they are still human beings; God made them." She is so wise. Out of that faith comes a Christian regard for life that is in opposition to the assisted suicide initiative, an initiative which, perhaps unintentionally, cheapens life, demeans life and debases life's worth to merely an equation with obvious utility and usefulness.

Christian faith refuses to allow suffering, or the fear of suffering, or the avoidance of suffering, or our own desire for autonomy to become the Lord of our lives, to become the regulator and determiner of whether a life is worth living. Yes, our Christian faith says, suffering is an evil and a trial; yet "suffering, while still an evil and a trial in itself, can always become a source of good." (*Gospel of Life*, 67) Those words were written by Pope John Paul II, whose own suffering and weakness and dying, in all their transparency and openness on international television, were a window into the vibrant worth life can always have, even in weakness, as we care for those who suffer and die, and as the suffering and dying care for us and *give us their gifts*.

My dad had dark days in caring for my mom, but I saw, and my dad testified, that their marriage, which truthfully had been rocky at times, became deeper, richer and more meaningful in the years of suffering leading up to their deaths. In caring for and living with my mom in those years of suffering, my dad reawakened to his love for her and she never stopped radiating love

for him. My friend commented, “Your mother was an angel”—which had not always been true in the years before. Many of you have read the novels of Anne Rice, a number of them about vampires. Anne Rice tells how it was the mystery of human suffering, embodied in the Jews, that drew her back to the idea that there may in fact be God, and eventually drew her back to the Catholic Church. After she had returned to the Catholic faith, Anne Rice’s husband was diagnosed with a brain tumor. She describes what happened in the midst of this real tragedy. She writes, “During his last weeks, my husband became a saint. He expressed love for those around him, understanding of people he hadn’t understood before. He wanted gifts given to those who helped him in his illness.” (*Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*) In the very month her husband died, Anne Rice began her work on her new series of novels, titled *Christ the Lord*.

I speak today out of my personal trust in the Christian faith that leads me to oppose the assisted suicide initiative, and together with Archbishop Brunett I ask you not to sign the petition to place the initiative on the ballot. And I speak today at the request of our St. Anne’s Social Justice Commission. In past weeks, information on resources regarding the assisted suicide initiative has been made available in the church bulletin. In the weeks ahead, our Social Justice Commission will provide further resources and speakers for your consideration on this most crucial topic of life.