



End-of-Life Decisions: Advance Directives

As difficult as talking about death may be, we should be having these conversations while we are young and healthy in order to most effectively plan for the time when we are not. Talk to your family, your loved ones, your doctors, and trusted clergy members regarding the hour of your death, and make sure they know your desire to be faithful to the teachings of the Church.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops urges Catholics to designate a proxy to make health care decisions for them should they become incapacitated. The Bishops urge the use of advance directives to appoint a health care agent who understands and shares your Catholic values and can help to apply them to the medical situation at hand. Advance Directives are legal documents that take effect when a person becomes incapacitated and is unable to make medical decisions. Below are the various forms such directives can take in New York State.

The Health Care Proxy

The health care proxy allows you to appoint someone to make health decisions for you should you become incapacitated. This can be a morally appropriate and useful tool, particularly if you've taken the time to discuss your religious beliefs, morals, and wishes. A health care agent can make decisions based on what you've shared, taking into account the current circumstances surrounding your condition and available treatment options. It's important to have conversations with that person and make your wishes known prior to when illness strikes.

The Living Will

A living will is a written document that allows you to spell out in advance what types of medical treatments you would like to receive or forgo if you had a particular medical condition and became unable to make your wishes known. Living wills are most inflexible, because they

attempt to write detailed instructions for a future unknown condition with unknown medical treatments and other unknown factors. No one could possibly predict in advance all of the decisions that must be made in a time of medical crisis. Designating a person to make decisions for you in a health care proxy when you become incapacitated is the preferred advance directive.

DNR (Do Not Resuscitate Order)

A DNR order is a medical order that instructs medical personnel not to attempt cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if a patient's heartbeat or breathing stops. It does not affect any other treatment. For Catholics, deciding about a DNR requires weighing benefits and burdens to determine if CPR would constitute ordinary or extraordinary care.

MOLST (Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment)

New York State now recognizes MOLST (Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment), which is a pre-set form establishing medical orders to administer or withhold treatments. The orders take effect immediately upon signing; they are not conditioned on the patient losing capacity. They allow patients to forgo anything from antibiotics to medically assisted nutrition and hydration. Some Church authorities have determined these documents to be intrinsically flawed because they are premised on absolute patient autonomy and they do not allow for truly informed consent. The New York State Bishops have urged extreme caution when deciding to complete a MOLST order, as it is intended for use only by those who are in the final stages of illness or frailty.

Learn more about end-of-life issues from a Catholic perspective at:

- www.catholicendoflife.org
- www.nyscatholic.org



New York State Catholic Conference