

Frequently Asked Questions about the Catholic Advance Health Care Directive

1. What is an “Advance Health Care Directive” and why would I want one? Every person has the right to make his or her own medical decisions. But what happens if you become so seriously ill or injured that you can no longer make your own medical decisions or communicate them to those around you? That is when an advance health care directive can be of great help. An advance health care directive, sometimes called a “living will,” is a legal document that allows you to give directions about your future medical care in the event you become unable to make your wishes known. An advance directive lets others know how you wish to be treated if you become seriously ill or injured and are unable to make decisions for yourself. In addition, an advance health care directive allows you to appoint a person with a power of attorney who will be legally entitled to make medical decisions for you if you become unable to make such decisions for yourself. This agent will make decisions in accordance with the directions you will have given him or her in the advance health care directive.

2. Why a “Catholic” Advance Health Care Directive? Advance health care directives apply whenever the patient becomes so sick that he or she cannot make his or her own medical decisions. This is true whether the condition is temporary or permanent. Therefore, advance directives can cover all sorts of medical procedures in all sorts of medical situations, including situations in which a patient will be expected to recover. They also deal with end of life decisions. As such, advance directives give critical information about your wishes for your health care to the person or persons you give authority to make decisions for you. As with any important decision we make, we should always make decisions about our health care in the light of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. This Gospel of Life is faithfully reflected in the teachings of the Catholic Church. As a part of its pastoral ministry the Diocese of Wilmington has prepared a Catholic Advance Health Care Directive so that your desire to be faithful to the Gospel of Life will be respected. This makes this Advance Directive different from secular advance directives, which often do not conform to the Gospel of Life.

3. Why should I use this Catholic Advance Directive rather than a non-Catholic advance directive such as the “Five Wishes” advance directive? The Catholic Advance Health Care Directive has been carefully drafted so that it complies not only with Delaware law, but also faithfully reflects precepts of the Gospel of Life. Advance directives from secular sources might encourage choices that we as Catholics believe to be immoral. In addition, this Advance Directive will provide directions for your spiritual care, especially the administration of the Sacraments.

4. I have previously filled out another Advance Directive. What should I do now? It probably would be best to review your prior Advance Directive and see if it complies with Catholic principles. If you have doubts, you might want to destroy it and substitute this Advance Directive.

5. What is the difference between the Church’s teaching on end of life issues and the secular point of view? The Church teaches that every human life is valuable in the eyes of God. This is true even in the case of lives touched by serious illness and disability.

Some secular ideologies do not hold human life in such high regard, but hold that human life only has value if it meets a certain quality of life standard. If a person's health falls below that standard, then the person can and ought to be "put out of their misery" through various forms of euthanasia ("mercy killing"). This is often accomplished by withholding food and water from a person who is not otherwise dying with the intention of hastening that person's demise. The Catholic Church teaches that all forms of euthanasia are gravely sinful.

6. Does this mean that I have to be kept alive indefinitely by machines? No, the Catholic Church does not teach that you must be kept alive by every possible means. Rather, the Church teaches that death is part of life and that while we are obligated to use *ordinary* means to preserve our lives, we are *not* morally obligated to use *extraordinary* means. Whether a given medical treatment is ordinary or extraordinary depends mostly on the medical facts at the time the treatment is to be administered. A medical treatment is considered extraordinary if it will be futile or will be unduly burdensome in comparison to its potential benefit. What is absolute is that we are never to act for the purpose of taking life. However, we are exercising good stewardship to accept the inevitability of death when it comes naturally. As a practical matter, this means that this Advance Directive will allow you to say that you do not want to be kept alive by artificial means for prolonged periods of time. This Advance Directive also will assure that you are always given basic medical care owed every sick person, including medically assisted nutrition and hydration (tube feeding) so long as it is really helping you.

7. What happens if I don't know now what will be best for me? You might well not know now what will be best for you in such a situation. Therefore, this Advance Directive allows you to appoint a trusted agent, perhaps a family member or friend, who will make the decisions on your behalf when the time comes.

8. Who should I pick as my agent? The most important thing is that you find a person who knows you well and who understands and will follow your wishes and Catholic values. Discuss your wishes with this person. Generally it will be a relative or close friend. Choose a person who cares about you, who can make difficult decisions and will follow your wishes. Because the agent might only be needed years from now, you should select an alternate agent as well in case the agent is unable to serve.

9. I travel often. Will this Advance Directive apply in other states? Many states allow advance directives and there is a good chance that other states will recognize this form, particularly if you have your signature notarized (which is not currently required in Delaware). If you spend a lot of time during the year in another state it would be a good idea to check with an attorney in that state to see if the form will be recognized there.

10. Can persons of other religions use this form? Yes. Many other religions, and particularly many other Christians, agree with the Catholic Church on these issues. There are parts of this form that apply specifically to Catholics, though, so if you are not Catholic you will want to modify those passages.