

Set Your House in Order

It is not uncommon that the family learns before the patient about the diagnosis of cancer or some other serious disease. The surgeon may inform the wife that her husband has an inoperable tumour and that there is no hope of long-term survival. She is immediately faced with the responsibility to inform her husband about his incurable illness. Now that is not easy! I have full sympathy with those who are reluctant to tell their relative. The news is devastating, and they want to shield him from shock and sorrow.

However I am convinced that this attitude is unwise even though it is well meaning. In the long term it is not in the best interest of the patient or the rest of the family to keep the diagnosis secret. The Bible encourages us to "speak the truth in love." It is much better to be open and honest with one another, especially with those who are closest to our heart, thus building a foundation of mutual trust and support.

The diagnosis of terminal disease hits the patient with a wave of shock or denial. Experience shows that most people will eventually find ways to deal with the reality of illness and the possibility of death. But the patient needs all the help and support he can get from his family and friends.

A strained and artificial situation arises if the truth is kept hidden. The patient will certainly realize that something is seriously wrong. He observes that his loved ones and friends are deeply troubled, and yet their demeanor is strange and distant.

Hiding the truth denies the patient the right to take important decisions about his life and treatment. "Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live," the prophet admonished King Hezekiah. The sick person may want to ask forgiveness from someone he has offended in the past. Perhaps he needs to make his will or settle his finances. A father may want to say a last word to his children, and express his gratitude and love to his wife.

There is a more compelling reason why the patient should not be deprived of the truth. Cancer can be terribly lonely. Who can bear it alone? Why should an artificial barrier of untruth be erected between him and his family and friends? How can he reach out for help if he is isolated from his loved ones by a glass wall? He needs to share his anxieties and hopes, and find solace and comfort in them. But that comfort can only be given when posing and pretence are set aside, and the painful truth is expressed plainly.

Finally, there is nothing like the knowledge of impending death to awaken a person from spiritual slumber. People are afraid of death because of the expectation of physical pain and agony -- thank God, modern medicine can go a long way to provide adequate relief. More importantly, the fear of death stems from a guilty conscience and the prospect of judgment and condemnation. An honest person is greatly troubled by his guilt and unworthiness.

Merit theology does not offer much consolation to the guilty soul. To find peace, the sinner must look away from himself to the mercy and grace of God in Christ. The prayer of Thérèse of Lisieux beautifully expresses that trust in the Lord:

"After earth's exile, I hope to go and enjoy you in the fatherland, but I do not want to lay up merits for heaven. I want to work for your love alone. . . . In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is blemished in your eyes. I

wish, then, to be clothed in your own justice and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself."

Am I ready to meet my Maker? Are you? The best way to prepare for eternity is to trust wholeheartedly in Christ for salvation, and to spend the days of our short pilgrimage in His service. Death, our last enemy, will become the gate to eternal and joyful communion with our blessed Lord.