

Foreword

There are, of course, moments of great beauty in winter. I think particularly of the soft, new snow that adds dazzling white elegance to everything on which it quietly settles, from stately evergreens to the trash cans beside the house. But most of winter where I live in central Ohio is simply bleak and cloud covered with spindly tree limbs, standing out, dark and leafless, against the horizon. Most often there is no snowy cosmetic to cover the brown grass and the decomposing leaves that linger after the raking is done. Such conditions are depressing to many and at times have been so for me as well. A favorite local columnist, who has written for years of weather and nature, often laments of winter and is quick to report the first signs of spring long before most others can see them. However, one morning, as I passed an ice covered field of corn stubble and saw the sun glinting off the surface as it rose behind a barren tree line, I was taken aback at the simple beauty of this very ordinary winter moment. It was winter, both bleak and beautiful, with no special effects.

The journey you are about to take in *Winter of Christian Life* is a journey into the bleak and the beautiful at one and the same time. The realities of the winter of life are faced in these pages with poignant honesty and insight in all their bleak truth. Yet the overriding reality is the beauty that the graced life in Christ brings to all states of affairs. This narrative is of the winter of the *Christian* life. As our local columnist was able to ferret out signs of spring's new life, even in the cold of winter, so Christians, at every stage of life, live in the hope of new life revealed in Christ's Easter triumph. The promise of God's future for us frames every present of our lives. The promise gives meaning, purpose, value, and beauty to every season. For this reason, winter is not just something to be gotten through, but something to be lived. We cherish winter life even on its harshest days because life is God's everlasting gift.

The need to enter into the winter of life with open eyes and ready minds is essential at this time in history. More than ever before, the winter of life lingers for more and more people. The medical, familial, social, and economic problems expand with longevity. And these issues of concern for the growing winter population are set in almost cruel contrast against a burgeoning youth culture. One consequence of this emphasis on things youthful is, as one of the sources cited within puts it, a "denial of aging." It is a bit ironic that a culture should be caught denying the values of the aging when there were never more aging people than now. But, never mind. One of the bleak realities this course helps us face is that the robust capacities of youthful vigor, personal success, and independence so highly valued in the broader culture are the very things that begin to slip away with advanced age. The social psychological burden this places on those on the

brink of winter or already there is hard to calculate. Thus, many facing the winter of life try to hold it back by clinging to the marks of youth.

Having noted this cultural reality, we are ready for another contrast. The intrinsic value and dignity that each of us has as a person from start to finish is that which God confers. We are created in the image of God for personal relationship with God and each other. This is God's gift and it cannot be taken away. Many of the ways in which our society lionizes individualism and independence at the expense of community and interdependence represent the sort of self-centeredness that resists our true being in God's image. We call it sin. Christ's redemptive work is God's way of revealing to us that God's creative purposes will not be denied. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the image of the Body of Christ all symbolize the fullness of what it means to live in God's image.

Winter of Christian Life helps us to stay in intimate touch with our true and abiding identity and worth as created in God's image, even in the most barren of times. Specifically, we are led into "the valley of the shadow of death," the care giving and the deciding that comes with the end of life and its choices. Our traveling companions are people involved in their winter stories, a rich variety of readings, carefully and aptly chosen, and scripture selections that go to the heart of matters. The stops along the way of this journey are carefully planned and organized to engender an optimum experience of mutual edification through group dialogue.

Some twenty-five years ago or so I can remember being asked to serve on a panel for a staff forum on death and dying at Ohio State University Hospital. As we were setting up to begin the program, one of the residents in attendance came up to me and said, "I'm glad you have come to talk about this topic. It is awfully hard to die at University Hospital." His telling comment reflected the prevailing ethos in medicine at that time, a commitment to keeping people alive at all costs. Too often the result was not really to prolong life but, rather, to prolong dying. Much has changed since those days. We have come more and more to see that care for the dying that maximizes the meaning and dignity of the final days is good medicine too. These welcome developments are evident in the pages of this course. Also evident is the fact that there are still tough choices to face, partly because medicine offers us more choices than ever before.

Winter of Christian Life takes participants deep into the challenging and sometimes confusing and agonizing choices that come at the end of life. Reflection on the distinctions between passive euthanasia, active euthanasia, suicide, assisted suicide or assisted dying and the benefits of hospice care are not simply informative; they offer an opportunity to test the principles of our Christian faith. Few people who participate in this program will not have had

some experience with these matters in their family or among their friends. Everyone can anticipate new or additional experiences with end of life decisions. The kind of study and reflection this course offers is way to prepare. It is a chance to take counsel with one's own thoughts and absorb the contributions of others before being thrown into an end of life situation, too tired and emotionally drained to function.

There is a dimension of Christian witness to these deliberations as well. It is not simply a matter of private faith and decision when we consider end of life choices. How we value life at every stage is a statement of our faith in God who gives life and redeems life. Sensitive and compassionate response to issues of legalized assisted dying coupled with advocacy for better pain management and palliative care are important windows through which the world can view the stuff of our faith and the depth of the hope that is within us. Christians need to display a careful and discerning grasp of how we best honor the sanctity of life by steering a course between neglect and futility in care for the dying. The Terri Schiavo case in the spring of 2005 created a media event eclipsed only by the death of Pope John Paul II. Religious and political interests were intertwined in a public debate over whether or not to remove her feeding tube. The medical opinion that she was in persistent vegetative state with no consciousness and no hope of recovery did not resolve the matter. The public debate reflected the bitter divide within her family. Harsh and painful; as the whole experience may have been, it lifted up once more the need for sensitive Christian ethical reflection and ministry to families under this sort of duress.

In his pioneering work on Christian ethics and medicine, *The Patient as Person*, the great ethicist, Paul Ramsey wrote, "Attending and accompanying with the patient in his [her] dying is, in fact the oldest medical ethics there is." *Winter of Christian Life* is always in harmony with this truth. Moreover, in these pages you will find that it is all about the fact that we are not alone. The Christian community is the locus of care for the caregiver and the cared for as well as a place of moral deliberation and preparation for life's decisions. Most of all, the Christian community is the place where grace abounds and the power of the Spirit is let loose through Word and Sacrament. *Winter of Christian Life* knows this and would have you draw strength, hope and peace from it.

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