

# “Protecting Life: Today and Tomorrow”

## NRLC 2005: The Challenges Ahead

### Moving Knowledge of Euthanasia from the Head to the Heart

By Mark Pickup

Have you ever been somewhere when suddenly you're struck by the impression that something of historical and spiritual significance is unfolding before you? The 2005 National Right to Life Convention in Bloomington, Minnesota, left that impression on me.

At first I wasn't sure what happened. But now, after the convention, when all displays have been packed away and everyone has returned to their homes, I've had a chance to reflect. I think I have an inkling what that major historical and spiritual event might have been.

For more than 30 years, the pro-life movement has stood for the value of all human life from conception to natural death, and against abortion and euthanasia. But I was always suspicious that our real heart-commitment revolved around abortion (until recently).

There was a good reason for this: Abortion represents a human holocaust beyond comprehension. More than 46 million lives have been needlessly and systematically extinguished in America before they ever saw the light of day. The abortion industry has churned along with impunity, killing unborn children at a rate of more than 160 an hour each and every day, year after year.

The future threat of euthanasia seemed to some almost secondary—until Terri Schindler-Schiavo's face stared directly at North America's culture of death. Terri put a human face to the barbaric practice of culling humanity of its brain-injured and

profoundly disabled by denying them food and water.

For years, there was a vague public awareness and suspicion that withholding nutrition and hydration from vulnerable disabled people was quietly occurring behind closed doors

and drawn curtains, in hospitals across North America. Occasionally we would hear about an “incident.”

If we found the thought uncomfortable, we could readily accept surreal assurances the victim was “unaware” and didn't “suffer.”

After all, the prospect of contemplating the alternative was unthinkable. The killing of Terri Schindler-Schiavo brought the practice out into the open with wall-to-wall media coverage.

Nobody can say they did not know. All of America knows it happened. It was as though God confronted the nation with Proverbs 24:11-12:

Deliver those who are drawn toward death,

And hold back those stumbling to the slaughter.

If you say, “Surely we did not know this,”

Does not He who weighs the heart consider it?

He who keeps your soul,

Does He not know it?

And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?

Terri stripped away cultural blinders! America is now confronted with a stark question: Will the cruel practice of killing cognitively disabled people be tolerated? Is any life so “worthless” it does not deserve food and water?

America must decide whether it will include or exclude people with profound disabilities. Now that this barbarism is out in plain sight [OR] the light of day, the stakes are higher than ever.

I believe the pro-life movement must and will play a critical role in demanding answers and pointing the way toward inclusion.

For many people, the 2005 National Right to Life Convention moved our collective commitment to resist euthanasia from the head to the heart. It is easy to see why.

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**Bob Schindler (right), who fought valiantly for his daughter Terri, and disability rights activist Mark Pickup who delivered a marvelous Prayer Breakfast address.**

Photo credit: Bill Molitor

## Moving Euthanasia

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The entire Schindler family attended the convention—less than three months after Terri's death by dehydration and starvation.

We stood in awe at the Schindlers' courage to stand against overwhelming odds, for the sake of love. Pro-life activists from across America embraced the Schindlers in their grief, just like they were embraced during Terri's terrible death vigil.

A memorial service for Terri Schindler-Schiavo was held on Saturday, June 18. It was packed. Tender memories of Terri were shared with the audience by her brother, Bobby, and sister, Suzanne.

We were given a glimpse of Terri's humanity. With great warmth and love, Bobby and Suzanne shared their recollections of Terri's joys and passion for life, her successes and foibles, her sense of fun, and her quick and easy humor.

They played Terri's favorite music and showed a video montage celebrating her life. They gave tribute to their parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, who have vowed that no other parent should have to endure what they endured.

The Schindler family made their grief transparent and invited us in. They trusted us in their vulnerability. We gazed briefly at their

heartrendingly beautiful love for Terri. Convention-goers were humbled at this tender and intimate privilege the Schindlers shared with us.

I personally felt almost oafish standing on such intensely personal and sacred ground of human souls—still soaked with tears. But they wanted to share with this with us, perhaps as a way of saying, "Thank you."

Bob and Mary endured the unendurable. They witnessed their child's torturous killing, and were forcibly forbidden to intervene or even relieve her suffering with a few drops of water.

They fought so long and hard to save Terri's life and now they were in front of us, vowing to work to stop the brutal practice of killing other disabled people by withholding food and water. They invited us to help them work to ensure no other family will have to watch a loved one die of hunger and thirst.

The National Right to Life Convention joined arms with the Schindler family. Our commitment to resist euthanasia moved from the head to the heart.

*Mark Pickup is a Canadian disability rights activist who also spoke at the NRL Convention.*