

THE ART OF DYING

REVIEWED BY KATHLEEN BENTON, DRPH

Compassion can't really be taught. It is only learned and nurtured through our own experience and our relation to the experience of others. In *Rediscovering the Art of Dying*, Sr. Nuala Kenny, SC, MD, writes about the importance of compassion and empathy in response to suffering at life's end.

To choose to discount the realities of pain, the dying process and the end of life is to ignore mercy, which Sr. Kenny beautifully defines as "a matter of attentiveness and sensitivity to the concrete needs we encounter." In a world where people who are talked around, artificially supported to avoid the demise by disease or, at worst, hastened to the grave to circumvent the challenges at life's end stage, it is refreshing to read a well-thought-out and historically researched manuscript that highlights the rich possibilities that the process of dying and accompanying people who are dying allow.

Jesus was human and divine. But in his passion and death, he is mostly just human. With purpose and eloquence, Sr. Kenny highlights Christ's humanity during his suffering. Jesus denies death before he accepts it. He is angry. He is weak. He is in pain. He needs help to make it through the end. As readers, we can accept our own very human flaws as we ponder the author's deliberate words that serve to compare Jesus' journey to each of ours. In her descriptions of Jesus' very human responses, Sr. Kenny teaches us that we must learn to forgive ourselves for the negative emotions we experience around death. Her goal is to gently persuade the reader to realize the hardships and accept the process that surrounds physical, spiritual and psychosocial suffering and grief.

Some of my favorite components of this book are the narratives and gently written case studies. Sr. Kenny calls these narratives patient-centered, and she goes on to explain that patient-centered means to know a person's story. Yes! People live to be heard

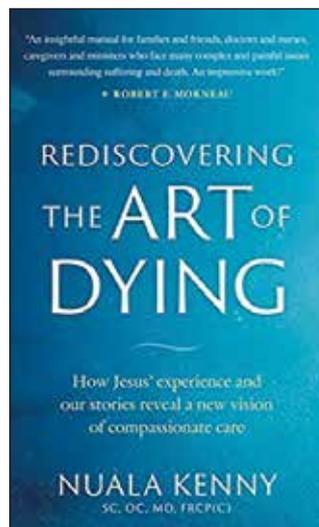
and to communicate themselves to others before they leave this earth.

The author walks the reader through many serious issues in modern medicine. One of those, for example, is advance care planning, which Sr. Kenny clearly defines as a spiritual, not legal, discussion. For so many years, we in health care approached advance care planning as a decisive, objective, black-and-white document instead of the intimate and personal process that it should be. Other important topics such as advancements in technology and palliative sedation are explained in lay terms and within the moral teachings of the church.

This book is most helpful for any reader seeking a Catholic understanding of ordinary care versus extraordinary care, and necessary pain control versus physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. Sr. Kenny's careful interpretation of research and citations of significant Gospel stories give fact to faith and simultaneously build faith in God's plan for us.

There is an abundance of expertise and experience in *Rediscovering the Art of Dying*. Sr. Kenny provides readers the opportunity to view the end of life as beauty, an art and a philosophical experience in the Lord. In the face of a society dedicated to youth and vitality and invested in longevity at almost any cost, Sr. Kenny leads us through a contemplation of the art of dying that can be found in solace, restored relationships, suffering and blessings. The book offers comfort to its readers as well as information and insights into how we might consider dying as an art. I close this review with gratitude to Sr. Kenny for her specific reflection of what the end of life should be.

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REDISCOVERING THE ART OF DYING

BY NUALA KENNY, SC, OC, MD
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