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by Peter Daly

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During this coronavirus shutdown, I have been working on projects at home. One of them is my "death box." Not an attractive name, but a necessary part of planning for death in our culture.

My death box is a plastic file box which contains all the relevant papers and records that will be needed as I approach death or needed by others after I die. It is a recognition that life is short and death is sure. Death may seem remote, just like pandemics may seem remote, but eventually it comes. So we might as well be ready.

What do I have in my death box? Here is a partial list. This may be added to later.

- A copy of my advanced care planning health care directive, colloquially known as a "living will," with instructions for my health care if, or when, I am unable to make decisions for myself. This includes instructions regarding pain management, life sustaining measures and whether an autopsy should be done.
- A copy of my appointment of a health care representative to make my health care decisions if I am unable to do so for myself. This should only be one person, but with backups if the representative is unavailable. (Give the representative the originals of the appointment and the directives.)
- A list of my doctors' names and addresses. (Constantly needing updating.)
- A copy of a durable power of attorney, appointing someone to take care of my financial affairs if I should be unable to take care of them for myself.
- A copy of my last will and testament to dispose of real estate and personal property. This is a legal document which must be done in accord with the law of the state where you live. It appoints my executor to handle my affairs after I die.
- A copy of my funeral plan and instructions for my funeral burial, including prayers, scripture readings and hymns. A copy goes to the archdiocese, but the original goes to our former choir director, who will be in charge of fulfilling my wishes. I also indicated which priests I would like to celebrate my funeral and preach, if they are available. I also have left instructions and money for a reception after my funeral.
- A list of prepaid funeral expenses and instructions for use of my death benefit policy.

- The deed to my burial plot in our parish cemetery. I purchased a plot about 10 years ago.
- A copy of my birth certificate, which will be necessary for completing my death certificate, when the time comes.
- A list of all my financial assets including bank accounts, retirement accounts and investments and insurance policies.
- The deed to my house and the record of its purchase.
- Important milestone documents such as copies of diplomas from various schools, my ordination documents, my admission to the American Bar Association, etc.
- A sketch of my concept of a headstone for my grave, with suggested wording.
- A list of the names and addresses of my heirs, friends and relatives to be notified at my death.

There are probably things which I have forgotten. But this is a start. Nobody dies with all their paperwork perfectly in order. The will, for example, needs to be updated every few years whenever there is a major change in circumstances, such as the death of heirs. The death box does not solve all problems, but it makes it easier for the people who have to come along and pick up the pieces when I die.

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Some things are not yet done. I still plan to write a brief biography. I will also draft an obituary to send to the local paper.

One thing I should do is tell people where to find the death box as the time comes.

In this time of COVID-19, the death box has a bigger spiritual purpose. It reminds me of my mortality. Now is the time to start letting go. Maybe because I am Irish, I do not really mind.

As I have been working on my death box, I find myself singing the words to "Molly Malone," which could almost have been written for the coronavirus:

She died of a fever

And sure, so one could save her

And that was the end of sweet Molly Malone

Now her ghost wheels her barrow

Through the streets broad and narrow

Crying "cockles and mussels, alive, alive, oh."

[Fr. Peter Daly is a retired priest of the Washington Archdiocese and a lawyer. After 31 years of parish service, he now works with Catholic Charities.]

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