‘Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.’

– JESUS (JN 12:23-24)
Relationships in the healing and caring professions

BY TANYA CONNOR
THE CATHOLIC FREE PRESS

PAXTON – “Your son … will die in 18 months,” the doctor told the parents. “There’s a lot of dying going on around here,” a priest told a fellow hospital chaplain.

What do you do with such news? The mother and chaplain who told these personal stories shared some of their responses to the threat of death. And the bishop summarized points from bishops’ teachings.

Bishop McManus, Father David Cavanagh, and Carolyn Brennan were speaking on a panel – “Cultivating relationships in the healing and caring professions” – Oct. 7 at Anna Maria College.

“We hope this is the first of many” presentations about medicine and bioethics from a Catholic perspective, said Marc Tumeinski, assistant professor of theology and program director of graduate theology at the college.

Bishop McManus talked about points in the U.S. bishops’ “Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services.” He had chaired the committee that revised a section of it.

Father Cavanagh, an Opus Dei priest, reflected on death from his experiences as a chaplain at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

Mrs. Brennan, CEO of Shriver Nursing Services/Family Lives in Westborough, talked about different approaches in health care.

WHO TO TRUST

She told about her son Michael, who was physically and mentally impaired. About two weeks after Michael was born, a doctor who never visited him said: “Your son is a lump. … He will never know you, he will never accomplish anything, he will die in 18 months, he will be a burden to you and your family if you take him home. … Put him in an institution and forget about him.”

“The doctor left, and a nurse came and said, “I need to teach you how to … care for your son so you can take him home.” “In whom would you put your trust?” Mrs. Brennan asked.

She said the doctor’s words were intended to be mechanical (and they were), and impersonal and rational. But, she said, “There is nothing impersonal about presuming what is best for another person. … There is nothing rational about predicting the future ability of a person.”

The nurse showed she believed in the sanctity of life, while the doctor acted like he did not believe in the unity of life, in which “what hurts one person … hurts all,” she said.

The Brennans took their son home to live.

“And live he did,” Mrs. Brennan said. “Michael was a son, a brother, a friend … a graduate … a parishioner, and an advocate for the sanctity of life and life lived with dignity. ‘Lump’ was one of the few roles that he did not play in his more than 20 good years of life.”

(Michael was born in 1985 and died in 2010. He was a quadriplegic with a tracheostomy who needed his lungs suctioned every five minutes. His mother

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HEALING: Chaplain says people at end of life seek signs of ‘the one who overcame death’

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became a nurse to better care for him and co-founded Family Lives to help others care for loved ones at home.)

NO DENYING DEATH

Father Cavanagh recalled a memorable message from a fellow hospital chaplain, who said, “There’s a lot of dying going on around here. If you are not looking in the mirror and saying, ‘I’m going to die,’ what are you doing trying to take care of dying people?” In other words, if chaplains are in denial about death and have not dealt with its mystery, how can they help others handle it?

Seeing Christ’s presence in suffering people you know “you are in the presence of a surpassing good,” he said. He called this “reverence.”

He told of visiting a blind 4-year-old girl with Down syndrome and heart issues, who was crying. But, upon hearing her mother, she smiled – her mother’s voice could reach her. The priest likened that to dying persons needing God, “the one who can reach them – the one who overcomes death and is risen.”

Many mothers with suffering children say, “I wish it was me” suffering instead, but they are limited in showing such love, Father Cavanagh said. But Christ was able to show that love and identification with sufferers. Christ said, “Father, let it be me,” and won salvation for all.

Father Cavanagh said that Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter “On the Christian Meaning of Suffering” (“Salvifici Doloris”) tells us that human beings can unite their suffering with Christ’s and thus commune with him and participate in his redemption.

As a chaplain Father Cavanagh found that even Muslims and “alleged atheists” wanted rosaries and called for a priest, as they sought signs that point to the one who overcame death.

Those who talk to God can come to see things as God sees them and can accompany those who are going home to God, he said.

JESUS’ HEALING MINISTRY

Bishop McManus said the purpose of Catholic health care institutions is to continue Jesus’ healing ministry, and healing ministry includes diagnosis and care. A good diagnosis is needed in order to determine what type of intervention is morally justified. Care at Catholic facilities must be in line with the Church’s respect for the dignity of the human person, who is made in God’s image.

People are obliged to use ordinary, but not extraordinary, means to preserve health. Bishop McManus said this distinction helps avoid the extremes of vitalism (insisting on doing everything possible) and euthanasia (killing the patient).

He also said living persons may donate organs if this does not compromise their own life.

The U.S. bishops’ directives are given to bishops to form their consciences, and bishops have a pastoral responsibility to help Catholics form their consciences, he said. And when non-Catholics come to a Catholic institution, they must be informed about what Catholics do and why.
When someone we love dies, most people experience grief. That grief can take many shapes and forms, can last for years or for a short time, and can be mild or intense — or both — during different times of the grief period.

Paula D'Arcy, a former psychotherapist and a current retreat leader and author, walks us through a variety of these aspects in her book, “Winter of the Heart: Finding Your Way Through the Mystery of Grief.”

While she approaches the topic from a reasoned and analytical view, she writes as someone who has experienced the process of grief in a most personal way: Her husband and young daughter were killed in an auto accident.

When she writes that the questions raised during the grieving process “can be overwhelming, and they are not easily sorted,” the reader senses that she has personally surrendered herself to God during a time of “deep brokenness.”

At 50 pages in length, the book can easily be read quickly but to do so would take away from the wisdom and insight that D’Arcy has so painfully gained. This is a book to read slowly and return to repeatedly to chew on the many nuggets she offers. Most chapters are only a few pages long. Also in each chapter steps for moving through the grieving process are highlighted.

This is a book to be shared with those grieving and those who wish to understand what others are experiencing.

Father Ron Rolheiser is a prolific writer and speaker. Many of his works look at complex theological issues, such as the human heart’s search for God (“Holy Longing”) and they are written in a style that is inviting and informative. Here he takes on the difficult issue of suicide in his usual style, writing with both compassion and empathy.

Father Rolheiser has experienced the loss of friends in this manner, and he has comforted others at the time of suicide in their families. In his words one feels comforted.

Throughout this little book Father Rolheiser confronts the stigma that suicide leaves, both for the individual who takes the life and for those left behind. He notes that “if someone dies in a morally compromised situation ... the goodness of that life and heart should not be judged by the circumstances of that death. Death caught that person on a down bounce” which does not offer “a true judgment as to the goodness of his or her heart.”

He writes that suicide is a disease, like cancer, and that those who commit suicide are usually sensitive. He notes that those who die at their own hands can be trusted to the “infinite understanding and compassion” of God.

This book offers hope and healing to those who have experienced the loss of a loved one or anyone trying to understand the topic.


Catholic officials: Green burial laws might not respect bodies

BY AGNIESZKA RUCK | CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

VANCOUVER, British Columbia (CNS) – When archdiocesan Catholic Cemeteries director Peter Nobes first heard composting might emerge as an eco-friendly burial alternative, he thought it was a crazy idea.

“I thought that would never be approved,” said Nobes.

Then, it was. Washington became the first U.S. state to approve composting human remains May 21. The legislation, which will take effect by 2020, allows the body of a deceased person to be mixed with materials like wood chips and straw in a controlled environment to be composted.

It also now allows alkaline hydrolysis, a process where a body is dissolved with chemicals and which is already legal in 19 other states.

“There are some more environmentally friendly and safe ways of disposing of human remains” besides burial and cremation, Washington state Sen. Jamie Pedersen of Seattle said before the bill became law.

He called recomposition and alkaline hydrolysis “wonderful options” that can show the world “a better way of dealing with this universal human experience” of death.

But Nobes, who runs Gardens of Gethsemani cemetery just north of the border in Surrey, British Columbia, said these alternatives might make a smaller footprint on the environment, but do not offer a body the dignity it deserves.

“We don’t ‘dispose’ of human remains,” he said. “We take care of them in great reverence in anticipation of the resurrection.”

He added while it might sound “romantic” to use the resulting compost to plant a tree in memory of a deceased family member, Catholics should know it does not comply with church teaching.

“This ties in with church teaching not to scatter cremated remains,” he said. “Cremated remains are the body in another form, and we’re called to keep them together and bury them in a place of reverence. We don’t scatter remains or split them among family members.”

Catholic bishops in Washington re-

SEE BURIAL, 7
Goats eat through weeds at Wisconsin cemetery

By Patricia Kasten | Catholic News Service

APPLETON, Wis. (CNS) – Goats tend to get a bad rap in church traditions – with the devil often portrayed with goat horns and hoofs, and Jesus speaking of separating goats from sheep.

But at St. Mary Cemetery in Appleton, goats are getting positive reviews.

In early July, five goats arrived in the cemetery from a nearby farm. They’re helping tackle the cemetery’s problem with buckthorn, an aggressive, invasive species of shrub that had overtaken the cemetery’s riverbank.

“We had been working the last couple of years to clean up the riverbank, to give a little better view of the river,” explained Brian Dresang, cemetery director. “We ran into an issue of buckthorn. Buckthorn will tear you apart if you get into it.”

The cemetery considered using herbicides “but we thought it was better to do it naturally,” Dresang told The Compass, newspaper of the Diocese of Green Bay.

The solution came from landscaper Ron Wolff who suggested using goats to clear the pesky plants.

It turns out goats don’t hate buckthorn like humans do. In fact it’s the opposite. Dresang quoted what Wolff told him: “Buckthorn is like hot apple pie to goats, it’s like their favorite thing.”

Since the goats find their own food, the cemetery only needs to supply fresh water daily. The goats will remain onsite until fall.
sponded to the new legislation with a statement in May reminding area Catholics that bodies of deceased loved ones are to be treated with respect.

“In memory of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the mystery that illumines the Christian meaning of death, burial is above all the most fitting way to reflect faith and hope in the resurrection of the body.”

While the church allows cremation, they wrote, ashes must be treated with the same respect as a body for burial and be kept in a sacred place.

Alkaline hydrolysis and recomposition, they said, need more research and peer-reviewed studies to prove they’re good for the environment and for public health. They expressed concern that alkaline hydrolysis could have a negative impact on municipal water systems because of the chemicals involved, and they criticized the legislation for not including screening to prevent dangerous pathogens from being released into the environment.

“The legislation failed to ensure that the emerging technologies show sufficient respect for the deceased body,” the bishops said.

Nobes agrees with Washington’s bishops, but he has seen a growing interest in eco-friendly burial options on Canada’s West Coast. For example, Royal Oak Burial Park in Victoria offers environmentally friendly burial options, where bodies are wrapped in a shroud made of natural fibers instead of a casket.

“People are conscious of the impact their burial choices have on the environment,” he said.

It will take years to come up with an eco-friendly burial option in British Columbia that follows all local regulations and complies with Catholic teachings about dignified burial – but Nobes said he is working on it.

“We intend to offer green burial options in the future,” he said. “We are researching our options right now.”
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