

Catholics can find comfort in death, expert says

During her 30 years as a physician and pediatrician, Dr. Patricia Fosarelli has seen her fair share of death and mourning.

As someone who also has a doctorate in theology, she has been in a unique position to address the grieving.

"I studied theology intentionally because I wanted to marry ministry and medicine," said the acting dean of St. Mary's Seminary and University's Ecumenical Institute of Theology in Roland Park. "In my ministry to families, I wanted to inform."

For Catholic families there is comfort in their time of anger, pain and sorrow.

"Our faith teaches us this life is not the end," Dr. Fosarelli said. "It gives us hope because Jesus was raised from the dead. We look at the whole of Jesus' life. He came as a human being. He wasn't just put on earth. He experienced fatigue and death. He is a model for us."

The voids for the grieving can often be huge, particularly when it comes suddenly.

"Our Catholic faith teaches us that in the communion of saints there are those who have gone before," she said. "Although we cannot physically hear them, we believe they are real in the communion of saints."

The communion of saints is the spiritual bond among the souls on earth, those in purgatory and the saints in heaven. We all live, the church says, in the same mystical body under Jesus Christ and share in everyone's welfare.

The concept can be difficult for children to understand. Dr. Fosarelli encourages a constant conversation with young people. She said children are often shielded from the sick, which can lead to a possible shock when the dying wish to see the young a final time. In a hospital, the machines that keep a person alive can be intimidating.

"Allow them (children) to ask their questions, be upset if they want and let them

experience what they want,” she said. “You have to meet them where they are.”

Dr. Fosarelli recently wrote a book titled “Prayers and Rituals at a Time of Illness and Dying: The Practices of Five World Religions.” In it, she explores how the different faiths grapple with death. She hopes it can be a pocket resource for dealing with death in different faith situations.

During her time in the medical field, she has served people of various faiths. Although she is experiencing death through her profession, individual beliefs transcend the moment.

“I show hospitality to that person’s beliefs while praying from my own beliefs,” Dr. Fosarelli said. “If there’s something special in their faith, like a ritual, I will talk to a clergy person and ask, ‘Could you come and do this for them?’ ”

Dr. Fosarelli said death still resonates on a personal level for her.

“I would have to be made of stone if I was not moved by the death of a child or someone in the prime of their life,” she said. “The good thing about my faith is that I know that person is in a better place in terms of their suffering.”