

Diocesan health care professionals earn national Catholic bioethics certification

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FALL RIVER — Four diocesan professionals — three health care workers and one educator — recently completed an intensive yearlong course administered by the National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) in Philadelphia, Penn., thereby becoming the first employees of the Fall River Diocese to be certified under the National Catholic Health Care Ethics Program. Based on established ethical and religious directives (ERDs) of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the certification brings the laity to a deeper understanding of Catholic ethical and moral issues that are generally reserved for the clergy and for experts.

“The National Catholic Certification Program in Health Care Ethics provides a year-long program that deals with the major bioethical issues that arise in modern medical and research environments,” Father Tad Pacholczyk, a priest of the Fall River Diocese and director of education at the NCBC, told *The Anchor*.

“I’m glad the diocese supported our doing this and getting laity involved in all of these issues, which many of our clergy deal with on a regular basis,” said Marianne Sullivan, nurse practitioner with the Diocesan Health Facilities office. “It just helps in spreading out that knowledge base.”

“I think it’s information that a layperson like me wouldn’t have picked up and delved into,” agreed Diane Rocha, social worker at Marian Manor in Taunton. “Being a Catholic and a social worker, you’re aware of the ERDs, you’re aware of where the Church stands on certain issues, but I thought I knew a lot until I really got into it.”

The foursome was encouraged to undertake the certification process by Msgr. Edmund J. Fitzgerald, director of Health Facilities for the Fall River Diocese and pastor at St. Thomas More Parish in Somerset, where St. Laurent is a parishioner.

“All of us have a connection to Msgr. Fitzgerald. He’s my pastor at St. Thomas More ... and he knows I have a nursing background and teach bioethics at Coyle-Cassidy High School,” St. Laurent said. “He had approached me more than a year ago to tell me about this program that the NCBC offered.”

“This is a first for our diocese,” Msgr. Fitzgerald said. “I read about the certification program and thought it would be very important because there are so many ethical health questions we deal with in our facilities. Because we’re in the long-term health care industry, we need to have an understanding of the ERDs and of Catholic principles. The idea of having people pray to that we thought was a very important investment.”

The four representatives from the Fall River Diocese were among the first class of approximately 60 from around the country to complete the first-ever certification process under the NCBC. The group went through an intensive, yearlong course to achieve their certifications that included weekly assignments, online interaction, and teleconferences. They also attended a two-day workshop in Boston and a final conference at the NCBC facility in Philadelphia where each person participated in a one-on-one interview, a mock ethics committee, and the presentation of a final thesis paper on a specific topic of their choosing.

“The final days were a panel discussion and a one-on-one interview with an individual from NCBC,” said Joanne Roque, director of clinical services for the Diocesan Health Facilities office. “And you get to meet all the individuals from across the country that you’ve either heard via a teleconference or seen their name in an email.”

According to St. Laurent, the goal of the program is to train people to become familiar with Catholic moral teachings on all ethical issues relative to health care. While all health care facilities follow established ethical and moral guidelines, there are more specific bioethical mandates for Catholic facilities as dictated by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“We answer to a higher power,” St. Laurent said. “In secular ethics, you’re looking at man’s reasoning, but in Catholic moral theology we’re using man’s reasoning inspired by the faith that we are fortunate to have. We believe that it’s inspired by the teaching of our Church — so it’s human reasoning inspired by faith and the documents we get from the magisterium that guide us in our ways.”

“Although we have ethics committees for all of our homes and these committees deal with specific problems at the home level,” Roque said, “the main issue was to make sure we have individuals in place who know the Catholic moral teaching and know how to address these different issues. It’s what we stand for as Catholics in the Catholic tradition. Everyone who works for Diocesan Health Facilities isn’t necessarily Catholic, but they need to understand Catholic moral teachings and traditions.”

“Not all the staff members here are Catholic, but one of our ERDs is that they have to follow the teachings of what we’re learning here,” agreed Ray McAndrews, administrator of Marian Manor in Taunton. “They don’t necessarily have to agree with it ... but this is the type of care we’re going to give in a Catholic facility — whether it’s a hospital or a long-term care facility.”

“We recently had several graduates from the Diocese of Fall River,” said Father Pacholczyk. “I am very glad to see this, knowing these individuals will be able to assist on Ethics Committees and in other advisory capacities within the diocese. I served on the Ethics Committee at Saint Anne’s Hospital in Fall River for several years after I was ordained, and recognize how important it is to have individuals with training in ethics who assist in the deliberations of such committees.”

Msgr. Fitzgerald noted how there are many controversial situations in bioethics that go far beyond the routine hydration, nutrition and end-of-life issues. As such, the NCBC certification process is very intensive and very difficult. Some of the thesis topics that the group tackled included in-vitro fertilization, the adoption of frozen embryos, and when it’s morally permissible to deactivate a cardio defibrillator.

“The program, although very intense, did speak to a lot of what we go through and what we see here,” Rocha said. “We do come across some issues in dealing with the elderly and end-of-life care and considering comfort measures when they are reaching end stages. Topics that may come up for us include pain management and the use of medications to keep someone comfortable and pain-free, IV hydration and, at times, even artificial nutrition through feeding tubes.”

“I think some of the beginning of life issues — artificial reproductive technologies is a big thing — and trying to understand what they are and what the Church teaches on the specific aspects were controversial,” St. Laurent agreed. “I also think always when we look at end-of-life, we’ll deal with issues of withholding treatment. It’s sometimes difficult and it’s not always as clear-cut as you might think.”

According to Msgr. Fitzgerald, he felt the new bioethics certification was important enough for the Diocesan Health Facilities office to fund the three health care professionals and provide a scholarship for St. Laurent to participate.

“I select the people for the program, because I want to make sure they have the appropriate background,” Msgr. Fitzgerald said. “We have three more in the program right now ... and we’re certainly going to evaluate having people participate every year.”

“It is a great thing to have people on staff who have gone through the program,” said McAndrews, who is currently working towards his own certification along with Dr. Daniel Brown, medical director at Madonna Manor in North Attleboro, and Claudia Levesque, director of social services at Madonna Manor. “I’m glad these four have led the way in the certification process and have become resources for me.”

“Our program typically has about 50 students from the U.S., Canada, and even the Philippines,” added Father Pacholczyk.

All four of the newly-certified expressed their joy and appreciation in having gone through the program and in working with Father Tad Pacholczyk.

“Father Tad is just brilliant,” Sullivan said. “To have been able to work with him and the other ethicists at NCBC was great and to have that resource available to us as Catholics is really great.”

“The NCBC is a resource we are lucky to have as Catholics because here is a panel of individuals who really would hash out a situation and really consider all types of situations,” Rocha said. “It was also interesting to see how these moral theologians and ethicists who have been studying these issues don’t always agree. You may have an opinion going in but after discussing it further, they flipped you, because there are things you just never would have considered before.”

Although the process was arduous and intensive, the foursome had no regrets about participating and agreed it was a worthwhile effort — for themselves individually and for the diocese overall.

“Coming from a purely clinical background, I really felt that it made me stretch and made me look much more broadly at health care decision-making,” Sullivan said. “Instead of just looking at the clinical aspect of things, you have to consider the whole component of our Catholic teaching and the ethical implications of treatment situations and end-of-life care. It stretched me from being more clinical to doing a lot more discernment thinking.”

“This course really makes you think about every aspect of every single case,” Roque added. “There’s no complacency in decision-making. It was pulled out of you to make a decision. If you go with your first instinct, you may have overlooked something and you need to look at every aspect.”

“I feel like having this program gives me a better foundation to pass along to our young people,” St. Laurent said. “I’m not involved in decision-making the way the others are, but I am involved in the education part and I can’t express how much I believe our youth need to be educated on these issues. They are our future voters, our future physicians, our future health care people, and I know it changes their hearts and minds on these issues.”