WORLD & NATION

Grieving is a necessity, says Arlington specialist

By Michael F. Flach Catholic News Service

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — The sudden violence of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon has forced Americans to think about their own vulnerability and mortality, said an authority on grief counseling.

"It could have happened to anyone of us," said Mila Ruiz Tecala, founder and director of the Center for Loss and Grief in Washington. "We have lost our sense of invulnerability. The illusion has been shattered that terrorism can't happen here in the US."

Tecala, who recently was appointed to the board of Catholic Charities in the Arlington Diocese, was the keynote speaker at a workshop on grief and loss the charity agency sponsored at Blessed Sacrament Church in Alexandria.

She has spent her professional career seeking to understand the grieving process that takes place after catastrophic events and individual tragedies. Following the Sept. 11 tragedies, she was asked to counsel employees of American Airlines, which experienced the loss of passengers and crew when one of its planes crashed into the Pentagon.

Grief, although not always connected to death, is the normal emotional reaction to any loss, Tecala said.

"Grief is a necessity. It is not a luxury. Those who avoid grief are like land mines. Anything can set them off," she said.

"We can't control when we are born or

when we die, but we can control how we live," Tecala continued. "There's nothing magical about dying well. We die the same way we live."

Grief, by itself, does not cause psychiatric problems, she added. "It's how we deal with grief that leads to problems."

Tecala said grief is a process of healing that often involves a series of emotions: anger, helplessness, fear, hatred, rage and violence.

When grief leads to hatred, it can take over your whole life, she said. "Hate is like a corrosive fluid. It only-damages the vessel that holds it."

An important part of the grieving process is mourning, or the "public validation" of grief, said Tecala. "Isolation will not allow you to grieve."

"How can this event, which is so painful, transform us to make us better?" she asked. "We all need meaning in life, a reason to get up in the morning."

Ghosts from previous losses can complicate the grieving process, she said.

The tendency is to worry about how children will handle the loss of a parent or relative, but children are resilient in coping with loss, Tecala said.

Children who experience loss at a young age, either through death, divorce or separation, can't finish their grieving process until age 21 when they are physically and emotionally mature, she said.

The death of a child, on the other hand, is the hardest thing for a parent to deal with, Tecala said. "You lose your future. All the hopes and dreams of the parent die



Protest in Ottawa

Protesters display signs during railies against the IMF and World Bank in Ottawa Nov. 17. Church-based organizations were among the 2,000 antiglobalization demonstrators who criticized the policies of capitalism and called on Canadians to create a just world.

with the death of a child."

To recover from such a devastating loss, parents must be able to reweave the tapestry of their lives, she said.

"Disenfranchised grief" is grief that is not affirmed by society, Tecala said. It could involve the death of a pet or the loss of a child through adoption, miscarriage or abortion.

"Forgiveness is an important component in the healing process," Tecala said. She also said making changes in one's life is another important element.

"By rebuilding your life you are honoring the person who died," she said.

Symptoms of grief often include crying, sleep disturbance or lack of appetite. "When grief has no outlet it can lead to physical problems such as headaches and pain," Tecala said.

Studies show that 40 percent of surviving spouses after age 55 will die within 18 months of their spouse. "It's not suicide," she said, but rather they lose the will to live and succumb to a preexisting illness.

Tecala cautioned professional counselors in attendance to understand and respect their limits and abilities. "We can't juggle more than three balls at a time," she said. "Some of us can't even juggle two."

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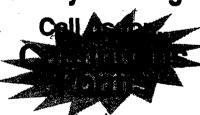
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