

Physician, working to stop euthanasia, wins top civil rights award

The recipient of this year's Catholic Civil Rights League's annual Archbishop Exner award says she drifted into family medicine, but now she sees God's providence in her work against euthanasia.

"I wasn't dreaming of being a doctor since I was two years old," said Ferrier, who is president of the Quebec-based Physicians' Alliance Against Euthanasia. "It just happened. I kind of fell into it."

Ferrier was studying science at CJEP, Quebec's transition year before university, and applied to study medicine "because it seemed what everyone was doing."

The year she finished her medical training, the Montreal General was hiring doctors that year and offered her a job. "I've been in that job since 1984."

"I think I probably could have been happy doing many, many different jobs," she said. "As far as work I am doing now against euthanasia, I see for sure, it's not an accident being doctor, doing geriatrics."

In her work at the geriatric clinic, "I see a lot of very vulnerable people, and some people who are not managing well," she said. "Along came euthanasia, and it put me in a position to say something about that."

Around the same time Dr. Ferrier "fell into" medicine, she began taking her Catholic faith seriously.

Ferrier had grown up in a Catholic family, and had not stopped going to church like most of her friends did. "It was not fashionable among teenagers in the 70s," she said.

Going to Mass on Sundays with her parents was "a given," and she was involved in her parish, but she began wondering, "There must be more to it than this."

As she began to question, "I ran into some people for whom there was much more to it than that, who saw God having a hand in their life every day, who had a serious prayer life so that's what I tried to do," she said.

Because of her faith and her vocation as a doctor, Ferrier became involved in setting up a network for Catholic doctors in Montreal.

"About 20 years ago, I had never had any Catholic mentor in medicine," she

said. Without a Catholic doctor to mentor her, “I muddled myself through many situations as far as medical issues go.”

“I thought we should have some kind of network,” she said. She met someone in bioethics with a similar dream and they started a bioethics discussion group that ran monthly starting in 2000.

In 2008, the Toronto-based Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute (CCBI) organized a conference for Catholic doctors in Montreal. “The CCBI said there should be an organization of Catholic doctors,” she said.

Out of that meeting, the Canadian Federation of Catholic Physicians’ Societies was born, and the bioethics group that began meeting in 2000 became the Montreal Catholic Doctors’ Guild.

When in 2009, people started hearing about coming euthanasia legislation, there was already a network, both locally and nationally to respond, she said.

While Alex Schadenburg and the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition did great work, Quebec’s language difference posed some challenges. So Ferrier and others launched the grassroots coalition Vivre Dans la Dignité/Living with Dignity.

The leader of the anti-euthanasia forces in Quebec at that time was Dr. André Bourque, who was head of general medicine at CHUM, the University of Montreal’s teaching hospital. He became Living with Dignity’s president and Linda Couture became the first executive director.

“When the commission’s report came out, we felt we needed not just a citizens’ voice but a physician’s voice,” she said.

That’s when Dr. Bourque, Ferrier and other doctors, helped by Dr. Balfour Mount and other palliative care physicians, crafted an eight-point declaration on end-of-life care.

In the spring of 2012, the Alliance “started looking for doctors to sign it,” she said, noting she was surprised how many did, including many who were not necessarily Christian or prolife.

“A few days after Christmas in 2012, André Bourque died suddenly, and the Physicians’ Alliance landed in my lap,” Ferrier said. “He was the doctor who inspired everybody.”

Ferrier stressed that both Living with Dignity and the Physicians’ Alliance have no religious affiliation, but promote good end-of-life care. In the fall of 2015, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) invited Dr. Ferrier to address its plenary meeting on the upcoming euthanasia law.

“We were in a difficult position after the [Supreme Court of Canada’s] Carter decision because we knew there would be a law that would legalize something

that was unjust and immoral, so we couldn't just sit back and let the other side craft the law," Ferrier said.

"So, we, as a non-religious organization started discussion with other allies what we were going to propose."

"We proposed very specific things," she said. "We didn't say don't legalize because we didn't have that option."

However, she asked Canada's bishops, "who speak to the Church and speak for the Church" not to say, "we can allow euthanasia with these conditions, with protections for the vulnerable."

"The bishops have to give a clear message that this is wrong," she said. "They can't say it's an evil law but here are some protections, because the faithful will not get the nuances."

"We were in a different position as lay people," she said.

Ferrier said the Quebec government had promised good palliative care access to accompany its euthanasia law, but "it's actually worse than it was."

Beds have been cut, and a new policy promising everyone in Quebec a family doctor has forced many palliative care doctors, who are also family physicians, to sign up primary care patients.

"There's a lot of turmoil in palliative care because of the euthanasia law," she said. "A lot of people have left."

The league presented Ferrier with the Archbishop Adam Exner Award for Catholic Excellence in Public Life at a banquet in Toronto on June 18.

Dr. Catherine Ferrier has used her talents and skills far beyond providing medical care to her patients, advancing studies in geriatrics, or teaching future doctors from her base in Montreal, or at McGill University," said League president Phil Horgan.

"We recognize the tireless work of Dr. Ferrier in our modest way with the League's Exner Award and we thank her for her professional excellence.