Like his namesake Raphael the Archangel, hospital chaplain Franciscan Father Raphael Eagle brings God’s healing presence by guiding families along a spiritual journey at Cook Children’s hospital.

The Book of Tobit has long intrigued Beth Park. The Scripture tells how God sent his archangel, Raphael, disguised as a common man, on a journey with Tobit’s son, Tobias. While protecting Tobias, Raphael shows the young man how to drive demons from his wife, Sarah, and how to heal Tobit. Raphael — meaning “God Heals” in Hebrew — is the patron saint of nurses, physicians, and young people away from home for the first time.

“I have always been taken with that story,” said Beth, who saw it as more than coincidence when “Father Raphael” appeared at Cook Children’s Medical Center in Fort Worth after her 8-year-old son was admitted with a soft-tissue cancer. No stranger to the halls of Cook Children’s, Father Raphael Eagle, TOR, — also known as “Father Ray” — is a full-time Catholic chaplain at the medical center.

“We were still in shock,” said Beth, recalling a summer day in 2006 that started out with magnetic resonance imaging to screen for cancer. “We were trying to get our bearings and also were in a little bit of denial, thinking there must be some sort of mistake. That’s when we first met Fr. Raphael.”

As doctors at Cook Children’s moved forward with a plan to cure the youngster of his cancer, Fr. Raphael offered his services to Thomas and his family during the child’s long journey of treatment and recovery.

“I remember Father Raphael telling me at a point, ‘OK, no sudden weight loss and get the makeup back on, because Thomas needs you to be Mom.’”

In addition to prayer and spiritual guidance, it was that kind of practical advice that Beth and her husband, Doug, valued in the early days of Thomas’ treatment at Cook Children’s.

“He helped us keep moving forward,” Beth said. “In those early days, you have so many doctors in and out of the room, and you’re trying to learn who’s who. It was very nice to have someone come in to help us on the spiritual side of how to deal with this diagnosis.”

For the Park family, their prayers would be answered. A 42-week treatment program, which involved frequent stays at Cook Children’s for chemotherapy and radiation, resulted in 22 years in Paraguay and 13 years as full-time chaplain to Thomas and his family during the child’s long journey of treatment and recovery.

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**Story and Photos by Jerry Circelli / Correspondent**

The chaplain explained that when people are admitted to hospitals, they are at once separated from their friends, their homes and their familiar spaces. And they are no longer in control of their schedules. To truly help children and their families mentally and spiritually, it is important to understand this new situation in which they find themselves, said Fr. Raphael.

The chaplain is also prepared to answer the most challenging questions asked of him when he first meets families.

“It falls to me to answer the question of ‘Why do people get sick?’ The main questions are ‘Why me?’ ‘Why now?’ and ‘Why my child?’”

Fr. Raphael often answers those questions with an assessment of the situation and a question of his own.

“I explain that even if doctors offer them a detailed explanation, it still does not change the situation. The real question is, ‘What do I do now?’”

Fr. Raphael said he explains to parents who are often distraught about their child’s serious illness that it is not their fault, and they are not being punished. He emphasizes that God is loving, not vengeful.

“I try to walk along with the faithful and help them understand the reality,” he said.

When parents arrive at the “What do I do now?” question, Fr. Raphael said the answer is not difficult. “I explain that you do the same things now that you did when your child was healthy. You talk to him, sing to him, play with him. You eat with him, play games with him, and read to him. You do the same things with a sick child as you do with a healthy child.”

Sick children not only need the help of the medical community to cope with illness and get better, but also need their parents to be strong, the chaplain said.

“Children are much more accepting of their difficulty, because their world revolves around mom and dad. They feel safe as long as mom and dad are there.”

As children look to their parents for security, the parents seek help from God to carry on, said Fr. Raphael. The Catholic Church offers that spiritual assistance in a number of ways.

“Every visit I make ends in prayer,” said Fr. Raphael, who has composed a handy booklet of prayers that he leaves with children and their families. Printed in both English and Spanish, the 25 prayers in the book range from giving thanks for the morning and evening, to asking for divine help through suffering and pain.

Fr. Raphael also offers sacraments to patients and their families, including Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Anointing of the Sick. He also celebrates a weekly Catholic Mass.

The commitment of the Diocese of Fort Worth at the medical center has become critical to the spiritual healing

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Fr. Raphael Eagle was the “constant” as he looked after the Park family’s spiritual needs during Thomas’ treatment for cancer in 2006. They met again recently at Cook Children’s for this photo. Seated in front of Fr. Raphael, from left, are mother, Beth; sons Stephen and Thomas; and father, Doug.

Fr. Raphael Eagle is the colorful and inviting Cook Children’s Medical Center Chapel, where he celebrates Mass every Friday.

Thirteen years ago, Ann Miller, director of pastoral care at Cook Children’s, was looking for a bilingual priest with hospital ministry experience to become a full-time Catholic chaplain at the medical center. Fr. Raphael was the perfect fit, she said, adding that support from the Diocese of Fort Worth has strengthened the pastoral ministry program at Cook Children’s.

Mass on Fridays in the chapel at Cook Children’s. That chapel has a distinction not typical at public hospitals — the Blessed Sacrament is present there.

The commitment of the Diocese of Fort Worth at the medical center has become critical to the spiritual healing.

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PrayerBears take up special residence at Cook Children’s

By Jerry Circelli / Correspondent

During the course of his extensive cancer treatment six years ago, Thomas Park found comfort in the two cuddly, colorful bears he received at Cook Children’s Medical Center. Not just any bears, these were PrayerBears. They are given to children after a painful procedure, during a lengthy stay, or to help them get through especially difficult times. The bears offer security and companionship, and they are reminders that God is always near. Children learn that people praying hard for their recovery donate the bears.

The PrayerBears meant a lot to Thomas during his nearly year-long treatment at Cook Children’s, and they still hold a special place in his heart and in his life. “They’re on my bed,” said Thomas.

An avid Boy Scout, 14-year-old Thomas recently completed requirements for a Catholic religious emblem, Ad Altare Dei — meaning “To the Altar of God” in Latin. To earn the medal, Boy Scouts must complete projects related to each of the seven sacraments. When it came to the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, the project called for Scouts to help someone who was ill, injured, or in need of special assistance. Thomas said it came naturally that he should focus on the PrayerBears project for Cook Children’s.

“When I came here for my cancer, I received a couple of PrayerBears,” Thomas said during a recent visit to Cook Children’s. “So I thought it would be great to reciprocate.”

“I’ve been here,” Thomas added. “And I’ve actually been healed.”

To help others heal, Thomas set a project goal to collect 100 bears in a two-week span at Holy Family Catholic School in Fort Worth, where he is an eighth-grader. His schoolmates responded in a big way, helping him exceed his goal by collecting 151 bears.

In mid-February this year, the bears were gathered up at the school during a special assembly with students and blessed before the medical center. Terry is known me as ‘The Bear Lady. I see the bears have to keep coming, too.”

The kids keep coming to Cooks, so the bears have to keep coming, too.”

Those who unselfishly give to help someone who was ill, injured, or in need of special assistance.

For information about donating a PrayerBear to a child, or about assisting in other ways, contact the Pastoral Care Department at Cook Children’s at (682) 885-4030.

Fr. Eagle...

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process for children and their families, said Dr. Ann Miller, director of pastoral care at Cook Children’s. Thirteen years ago, she actively sought a full-time Catholic chaplain, experienced and respected in hospital ministry, who was a priest and could speak English and Spanish. Fr. Raphael filled the bill perfectly, the director said. “We really wanted him,” she added. Cook Children’s now has 17 chaplains, with Fr. Raphael the first to be hired full time to minister to a specific denomination.

“This is a ministry to which God has called us,” Miller said, explaining that the team of pastoral care workers at Cook Children’s is always sensitive to their mission of offering spiritual support for children, families, and staff.

“If we do our job well, pray with them, and support them, they are better able to sense the presence of God, which is really what we all need in crisis.”

Miller went on to point out, “Fear not” in the Bible is always followed by ‘I am with you.’ So my job and Father Ray’s is to help provide the ‘For I am with you.’

Fr. Raphael echoes that sentiment, emphasizing his respect for Cook Children’s, which has at the core of its mission statement a promise that deals specifically with a respect for life and spirituality. The Cook Children’s promise reads:

knowing that every child’s life is sacred, it is the promise of Cook Children’s to improve the health of every child in our region through the prevention and treatment of illness, disease, and injury.

“When you start your mission statement that way, it says a lot,” Fr. Raphael said. “It’s the foundation of what we do here at Cook’s, and we all feel the same way. It’s why this is such a great place.”