



One-Day Spiritual Retreat Highlights Saturday, October 3, 2015

It was a dark, rainy, and raw day—too cold for October—when we arrived at St. Patrick’s Parish in Stoneham at 7:45am on Saturday, October 3rd. This was to be our first parish retreat in MA—and what a retreat it was!

As we began to unload all of the boxes and materials, I started to feel overwhelmed by all that lay before us. But, within minutes, Emmaus Parent Companions, Beth and Andy Culhane, Adam’s parents, magically appeared at the front door bringing much needed support and strength; they were happy to do whatever needed to be done to launch this retreat. One by one, other members of the Retreat Team entered to begin preparations.



Soon parents began arriving—and we began. We welcomed 23 parents: 16 new parents, one returning parent, and six Emmaus Parent Companions from previous retreats. Most were from Stoneham, but others came from Arlington, Winchester, Medford, Woburn, Tewksbury, Sherborn, and East Boston. Age of children lost ranged from prenatal to 66 years. Cause of death included miscarriage, murder, illness, accident, suicide, and drug overdose. Four families lost more than one child.

Patrice Fitzpatrick, St. Patrick’s Pastoral Assistant and Retreat Coordinator, led the Retreat Team members in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to shepherd and guide us throughout the day in a special way. Other Retreat Team members included Fr. Jurgen Lias, pastor of St. Gregory Ordinariate at St. Patrick’s, Genevieve Baudin, Asheligh’s mother, and Laurie Jacob, Dary’s mother.

Throughout the day others who joined the team included:

- members of St. Patrick’s Charismatic Prayer Group, who sat vigil in the Chapel all day long with the candles of our children
- members of St. Patrick’s Prayer Shawl Ministry, who painstakingly made “handmade hugs” for each mother and father who came to the retreat.
- members of St. Patrick’s Music Ministry who added so much to our celebration of the Eucharist with their joyful songs of hope and resurrection

- Brian Fitzpatrick who served in many capacities from chauffeur to caterer
- Other parishioners, staff, and Emmaus Parent Companions and supporters who held us in prayer before, during, and after the retreat.

To date, this was one of our largest retreat teams; it was gratifying to see so many people of the parish so actively involved.

After a short welcome, the retreat officially began with an absolutely beautiful Opening Prayer Service led by Patrice. Always the most moving segment of this service is the lighting of the memorial candles for our children. Patrice beautifully explained the significance of candles representing the Light of Christ and the light of our children in our lives. She said...

“We light these candles knowing that our children are in the Light; knowing that the Light they brought into our lives and our hearts continues to shine. As we see the light and feel the warmth of their flames, we are in touch with their presence among us. They brought Light and Love and they continue burning brightly in Light and Love. They continue to bring us the light of Faith, Hope, and Love as we allow ourselves to feel their presence and to experience the brightness of their Light and the warmth of their Love. The light of God’s love brings our children among us, for they live on in the Light. One day, we know we, too, will share that Light.”

In keeping with our new tradition, we also lit our commemorative candle, which we carry to each retreat, memorializing the children of our generous donors and benefactors. Together with a continuously looping photo montage of their children, it remained lit and running throughout the entire retreat, as these children and parents were remembered in prayer. The candles for this retreat were donated by Rob and Krista Skinner in loving memory of their dear son, Aidan.

Ending the Opening Prayer Service, we sang the ministry’s newly adopted sacred hymn, “Emmaus Song,” by Monica Brown, which implores Jesus to “*Come Journey with Me.*” The retreat was off to a good start.

Next we moved into the Parish Community Room for a Reflection by Fr. Jurgen. Fr. Jurgen is unique in the Catholic world in that he is a priest who is married and has children! This is because in 2012 Pope Benedict opened the arms of the Catholic Church to welcome all Anglican (Episcopal) priests and their families and congregations who chose to adopt the teachings of the Catholic Church.



After 40 years as an Episcopal priest, Fr. Jurgen was ordained a Catholic priest by Archbishop Sean O’Malley in 2013. It is obvious the Fr. Jurgen fervently embraces all of the teachings of our faith—and is most eloquent in sharing his beliefs.

Fr. Jurgen then shared three things he has learned as a priest and a parent:

1. We live in a fallen world. Proof of this is the death of children. The death of any child is evil and a demonstration that the human race is broken.
2. God is with us. The cornerstone of Christianity and, in particular, the Catholic faith is that Jesus Christ conquered death. St. Paul asks, “*O Death, where is thy victory?*” Because of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are all, every one of us, promised eternal life. It is not a wish; it is a promise.
3. Because of the Resurrection, the dance isn’t over. Our children have died and we miss them terribly, but the dance (our relationship) definitely, absolutely, is not over—it is changed. We have to learn a new step. We are not here on earth pining for the day when we can see our

children again. We have the very real opportunity of forging a vibrant, new relationship that continues every day in a new and dynamic and powerful way. We are one with our kids through the Communion of Saints! We are with them every single day and they are with us!



After lunch, we reconvened for Parent Witnessing, a time when Emmaus Parent Companions (who have been on several retreats before and want to walk with others in their grief journey) share where they are now, at this particular time, in their spiritual grief journeys.

Sharing first was Genevieve who gave a heart wrenching account of losing her beautiful daughter, Asheligh to a car accident. She talked about her overwhelming need after Asheligh died, to embrace her grief and not fight it, which she continues to do to this day. The choice, said Genevieve, is to give into grief—or to try to find meaning from it.

One way she has found meaning is to spread the message of Asheligh’s beautiful life and wonderful Presence by leaving parts of her in different places of the world... her cladaugh ring in Ireland, her pink luggage in New York... and who knows what else or where next year. One thing Genevieve does know is that Asheligh approves and is laughing. And Genevieve very much feels the healing power of her daughter every day.

Next was Laurie, whose beautiful daughter, Dary, died unexpectedly of arrhythmia when she was 18 years old. “Like Fr. Jurgen,” said Laurie, “I was a convert. Whenever I had questions about what I believed, I went to my daughter, who always had answers because of her deep faith. When she died, my primal screams resonated. I despaired and was so angry with a God who would/could let this happen. I let Him have it,” she said, “I wanted to die.”

But then... she said, I started to receive definite signs of Dary...outdoors, particularly... at Mass, in books, music, and dreams. I prayed to Mary, went to Mass, received the Eucharist, but mostly sat in the chapel and was still. Spiritual direction, silent retreats, and several priests definitely helped me shed my anger and bitterness. What I really needed, she said, was finding a purpose, which I have now found. I am pursuing a degree in theology and now feel joy, but above all, hope. “Dary, my child,” said Laurie, “you don’t get to rest in peace. You have work to do here on earth!”



After a short break, we broke into smaller groups of mothers and fathers to consider the question of “*Where is God in your pain right now?*”

After much discussion, some mothers concluded...we thought we were in control, but we are not. Turning to God is the only way to get through this horrific experience of losing a child. Sometimes saying over and over again. “*My Lord and My God,*” or “*Be with me, Lord*” is all we can do.

No common denominator emerged with fathers; however, the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable as they discussed the concept of a real relationship with God and the fact that every tear is a prayer.

After a short break, parents regrouped and were given the option to write a letter to either their child or to God. “*What would you say to your beautiful child today if you could?*” they were asked. Many parents said later that they felt this experience to be extremely cathartic. “*What would you say to God if He were physically here with you today?*”

After writing the letters, parents came together as a group and we invoked the Holy Spirit in choosing names of parents to be paired one-on-one for an Emmaus Walk. This also proved to be one of the most appreciated activities of the day.

After the Emmaus Walk, parents were given the opportunity to choose from the following options for the next segment...

- Reconciliation
- Spiritual Direction
- Listening to our “Consolation Through Music” CD , reviewing the lyrics, and discussing how music can significantly contribute to the healing process
- Quiet reflection/Free time



At 5:30pm Fr. Jurgen celebrated an absolutely beautiful Mass. Our children and the children of donors were remembered both at the Intercessions and in the Canon.

Fr. Jurgen’s homily was again phenomenal. It addressed the question that all of us parents ask at one time or another...

“Why did God take my child?”

“God did not take your child,” said Fr, Jurgen. “Death took your child. But Jesus took your child from Death. And He gives your child back to you. Because of the resurrection, you WILL see your child again. Jesus Christ conquered death. **This is not a promise; it is a fact.**”

When you conceived your child, he said, you not only conceived a physical being, you and the Father created a soul that will live on and into eternity. Our children are not ours, he said, we do not own them. They are gifts from God to cherish and to love as best we can. In reality... they are children of God.

As the Music Ministry sang at the end of Mass, we processed out of the chapel and walked the entire way around the perimeter of the church (thankfully, the weather had improved by then).

What an extraordinary procession! Following Fr. Jurgen, who prayed at and incensed each site, we sang a Taize chant and processed to three of St. Patrick’s outside shrines. These included grottos honoring Our Lady of Fatima and Our Lady of Lourdes, and a Memorial for young children who have died. It was so moving to process and sing together, watch the light of day begin to fade away, and feel the closeness and comfort of each other.

The letters to our children and God we had written earlier had been burned and the ashes mixed with the incense Fr. Jurgen used during the procession. During each stop, Charley sprinkled the remaining ashes on the ground, so that our intentions could continue to be prayed for by others who will visit these sacred places in the future.

Thanks to Patrice and her husband, Brian, dinner, which



followed next, was wonderful. In fact, both Patrice and Brian did a great job nourishing our bodies—and our souls—throughout the entire day.

Although it was a very long day, it seemed as if the Closing Prayer Service came too early. None of us was ready to go, but it was time. The service began with a call to *“Be Not Afraid”* and a much-needed reminder that *“Blest are you who weep and mourn, for one day you will laugh.”*

Also included in the service was the *“We Remember Them”* prayer in which we invoke memories from everything from the rising of the sun to all the joys we yearn to share. In everything... we see and remember them. The choice is ours.

At that point, the retreat ended as we sang out loudly and clearly...

Go In Peace

*There will be no more darkness /There is no more night, no more night
There will be no more sadness/Only joy and light, joy and light
Lift your eyes beyond the hills/And see the dawn
There is beautiful mercy/ In the arms of the Holy One
Go in peace, God be with you/Go in peace, be at rest
With the saints and the angels/Now you are free
Go in peace*

*See, the Father is waiting/With a robe of white, purest white
Go and feast at his table/With the bread of life, bread of life
Lift your heart, rejoice and sing/For you are home
Home at last and forever/in the arms of the Holy One.
Go in peace, God be with you/Go in peace, be at rest
With the saints and the angels/Now you are free
Go in peace*

Now you are free... Go in peace... Go in peace.

Afterwards, parents were asked to share their reactions to the retreat; here is a sampling of their responses...

- *“I needed to experience/feel the spiritual reality of my loss. It’s a very sensitive subject to discuss spirituality publicly. Many, if not all of my friends & family could not empathize with the emotional chaos caused by the death of my son. To some, death & religion are taboo subjects.”*
- *“The retreat gave me the environment to reflect, pray and create an opportunity to experience the Holy Spirit. The sharing was outstanding and demonstrated the diversity of the effects of grief on the part of the participants. It more than met my expectations.”*
- *“It was good to talk to others and know we are not alone. I especially liked the spirituality of this retreat in remembering our loved ones in prayer and having a Mass devoted to them.”*

And so... another Emmaus Ministry retreat ended, our first parish retreat in MA. Please stay with us, Lord, and help us to feel always the comforting embrace of your healing love.

