

Saint Theresa-St. Christopher Parish Tiverton, RI



ONE-DAY SPIRITUAL RETREAT November 21, 2015 9:30am-7:30pm

“It feels like we are one giant heart beating together, as we feel each other’s pain”
--Grieving mother during the November Tiverton retreat

*We need to look for signs from our loved ones because they are all around us,
whether it is a cardinal, a favorite song, a picture...*
Signs are God’s way of affirming that our Loved Ones are still here.
--Fr. Shemek Lepak during the November Tiverton retreat

When a Rhode Island mother lost her beautiful 32 year-old daughter almost two years ago, she was devastated. Overnight her life changed dramatically and irrevocably. Nothing would ever be the same again; it was completely and totally impossible to comprehend. Those of us who have been there can readily identify with what she felt.

She was helped in those early days by a young priest, Fr. Przemyslaw “Shemek” Lepak, pastor of her parish, St. Theresa’s, in Tiverton. He validated her grief and told her that losing a child is unthinkable...something for which we have no preparation. But, he said, death is not the end.

A short time later she found out about the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents through a small ad in her church bulletin. Although it had been only a few months since the loss of her daughter, she came to a One-Day Retreat at St. Anthony Shrine & Ministry Center in Boston. “It was just what I needed,” she said.

After participating in several more retreats, she made a decision... if this ministry has helped me so much, it will help other grieving parents. We need to bring it to Rhode Island. Fr. Shemek enthusiastically agreed and St. Theresa’s Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents was born.

Working with two other Rhode Island mother whose beautiful sons died within the past four years, the three mothers introduced the ministry to their community with a wonderful One-Day retreat at St. Theresa’s on November 21, 2015.



Only the second time a retreat has been offered by a parish, it is obvious that this format is Spirit-filled and Spirit-led. Retreat team numbers swelled with so many parishioners offering to do whatever it took to coordinate a day of peace and comfort for those most in need. It was truly a group effort.

Prior to the retreat, Rick Snizek of the *Rhode Island Catholic* newspaper wrote an article to tell people in the diocese about this new ministry now available in their state. (See complete article at the end of these Highlights.)

Serving on the retreat team were

- Father Przemyslaw “Shemek” Lepak, Spiritual Leader, Celebrant, Confessor
- Peggy Hassett, Spiritual Leader, Spiritual Director
- Barbara Murray, *In Loving Memory of Melissa*, Retreat Coordination, Music, Hospitality
- Denise Carlucci, *In Loving Memory of Nicholas*, Retreat Coordination, Parent Witnessing, Hospitality
- Genevieve Baudin, *In Loving Memory of Asheligh*, Parent Witnessing, Memorial Candle Donation
- Lucille Gince, *In Loving Memory of Jared*, Hospitality
- Kary Miksis and Pat Karp, Volunteers
- The Women’s Guild of St. Theresa-St. Christopher Parishes, Hospitality, Set-up, Clean-up
- John Irwin, *In Loving Memory of Melissa*, Hospitality, Set-up, Clean-up
- St. John the Evangelist, Chelmsford, MA Handmade Hug Ministry, Handmade Hugs
- Liz Pedro, Music
- Members of St. Theresa-St. Christopher Confirmation Class, Words of comfort
- Beth Rapoza, *In Loving Memory of her brother, Paul*, Memorial Candles, Parent Directory, Name Tags
- Charley & Diane Monaghan, *In Loving Memory of Paul*, Retreat Coordination

We welcomed 20 grieving parents from Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut and honored 16 children whose ages ranged from prenatal to 36 years when they died. Cause of death included car accidents, illnesses, drug overdoses, murder, and suicide.

Members of St. Theresa-St. Christopher's confirmation class wrote notes of comfort to the parents. These beautiful messages included...



"Get well soon!"

"I would like to say I am sorry for your loss. I hope with every bone in my body that you get better."--Derek

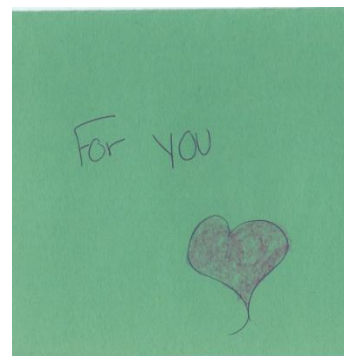
"I am so sorry for your loss. My mom lost two kids in a miscarriage. Welcome to our church."--Jillian

"I am so sorry for your loss. I know losing someone you love very much is hard. I hope you feel better soon."--Alyssa

"It must be hard to carry on with life. You are very brave and strong."--Kayley

Check-in was a bit hectic, as not everyone realized that they needed to register for the retreat beforehand. But everyone was accommodated and the retreat began as scheduled. Peggy Hasset led the retreat team in private prayer asking God to open our minds and hearts to whatever he wanted us to see, hear, and feel that day; to take ourselves out of the equation and serve only as willing instruments for whatever we are called to do.

The Opening Prayer Service was particularly moving, with Peggy leading us in prayer and Barbara Murray and Liz Pedro leading us in music. Charley reminded us of the symbolism of candles in Catholic liturgy representing Christ who is the Light of the world—and our children, whose lights, because of Christ, will never die. Together we prayed the Candle Lighting Prayer...



L: Lord, you are the Light of the World

A: *Help us feel your presence in the lighting of this candle.*

L: Lord, you gave us the gift of our children

A: *Help us feel their presence in the lighting of this candle.*

L: Lord, you gave us the hope of eternal life

A: *Help us confirm that hope in the lighting of this candle.*

L: Lord, you gave us love

A: *Help us to know that, as much as we love our children, you love them even more.*

L: We ask you this through Christ, Our Lord

A: *Amen*

After a short break, we gathered for a very moving reflection by Fr. Shemek, who opened with a passage from John:

"Do not let your heart be troubled. You believe in God. Believe in me also. In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places. If there were not, I would have told you. For I go to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will return again, and then I will take you to myself, so that where I am, you also may be. And you know where I am going. And you know the way."

"Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus said to him: 'I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.'"

(John 14: 1-6)

The gospel of John, said Fr. Shemek, is most appropriate during times of pain and sorrow. It is important to remember that Jesus says, *"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life."*

Fr. Shemek lost his mother at a very young age; his father was emotionally unavailable so he quickly developed a hatred of God with much anger and many questions. After years of hating God, he found that the more he hated God, the closer he got to God. God wants us, he said, especially in our pain. After many years, his hatred turned into a profound love of God and he found his purpose.

When we lose a loved one, especially a child, said Fr. Shemek, we have this huge hole inside; we have to figure out how to fill it. We don't really know how much we love someone until we have lost them. We are human; we want to understand; we want to blame someone.

But death is not the end, he said. Death is but a doorway to something better. It is not the last chapter. It is another chapter. We need to be people of life, not death, he said. We need to give ourselves permission to continue to live. We don't have to be paralyzed by grief to show our love.



We need to look for signs from our loved ones, said Fr. Shemek, because they are all around us, whether it be a cardinal, a favorite song, a picture...signs are God's way of affirming that our Loved Ones are still here. Listen to them! This was very comforting to those of us who avoid talking about signs from our children even though we see them all the time and believe in them.

Fr. Shemek concluded with an Irish poem and a beautiful rendition of the Polish hymn, *"Mother of Sorrow."*

Irish Poem

*When I come to the end of the road
And the sun has set for me,
I want no rites in a gloom filled room.
Why cry for a soul set free?*

*Miss me a little, but not for long,
And not with your head bowed low.
Remember the love that we once shared
Miss me, but let me go.*

*For this is a journey we all must take,
And each one must go it alone.
It's all part of our Heavenly Father's plan
a step on the road to home.*

*When you are lonely and sick of heart,
go to the friends we know,
and bury your sorrows in doing good deeds.
Miss me, but let me go.*

After this absolutely beautiful and comforting reflection, we enjoyed a lively discussion on signs, filling the holes in our hearts, and the promise of eternal life.

A favorite part of every retreat is Parent Witnessing, when parents who have been to a retreat before share where they are in their spiritual journeys. There are no right or wrong answers. It is what it is. Parents are brutally honest—sometimes sharing they are closer than ever to God and others saying they feel lost and abandoned. Every perspective offers points of interest and something that at least one of the other parents needs to hear.

After lunch Denise C told the story of her beloved son, Nick. I totally believe, she said, that as a priest once told me when I worried about my son, everything will be all right in the end. It will be all right in the end because we will be together again. Would I rather he be with me here on earth or at peace with God? Considering his struggles on earth, I am happy he is at peace with God, she said.

Genevieve B talked about her beautiful daughter, Asheligh, and the many signs of her presence she has given her mother and others since her death. God helped me to understand that when a tragedy occurs, it presents a choice, said Genevieve. I could give in to the emptiness that fills my heart and constricts my ability to think or even breathe. Or I can try to find meaning.



After dividing into small groups of mothers and fathers, we talked about life after the death of a child. Several mothers talked about the need to grieve and how they have been unable to do so because of other family issues. Fathers talked about questioning their faith and needing to talk about what they are going through as fathers.

After a short break, we paused to write letters—either to our children or to God—speaking unspoken words, crying out in our grief, asking questions we want answered...anything at all that we want to say. Later on this day, our letters would be burned, then mixed with the incense used during Mass. This way our letters, our prayers, rose like incense to heaven.

Then we invoked the Holy Spirit as we drew names for our one-on-one Emmaus walk. Parents were paired by the Holy Spirit to share whatever they wanted to share—or to listen. Afterwards, many parents remarked that they understood why they were paired with that particular person.

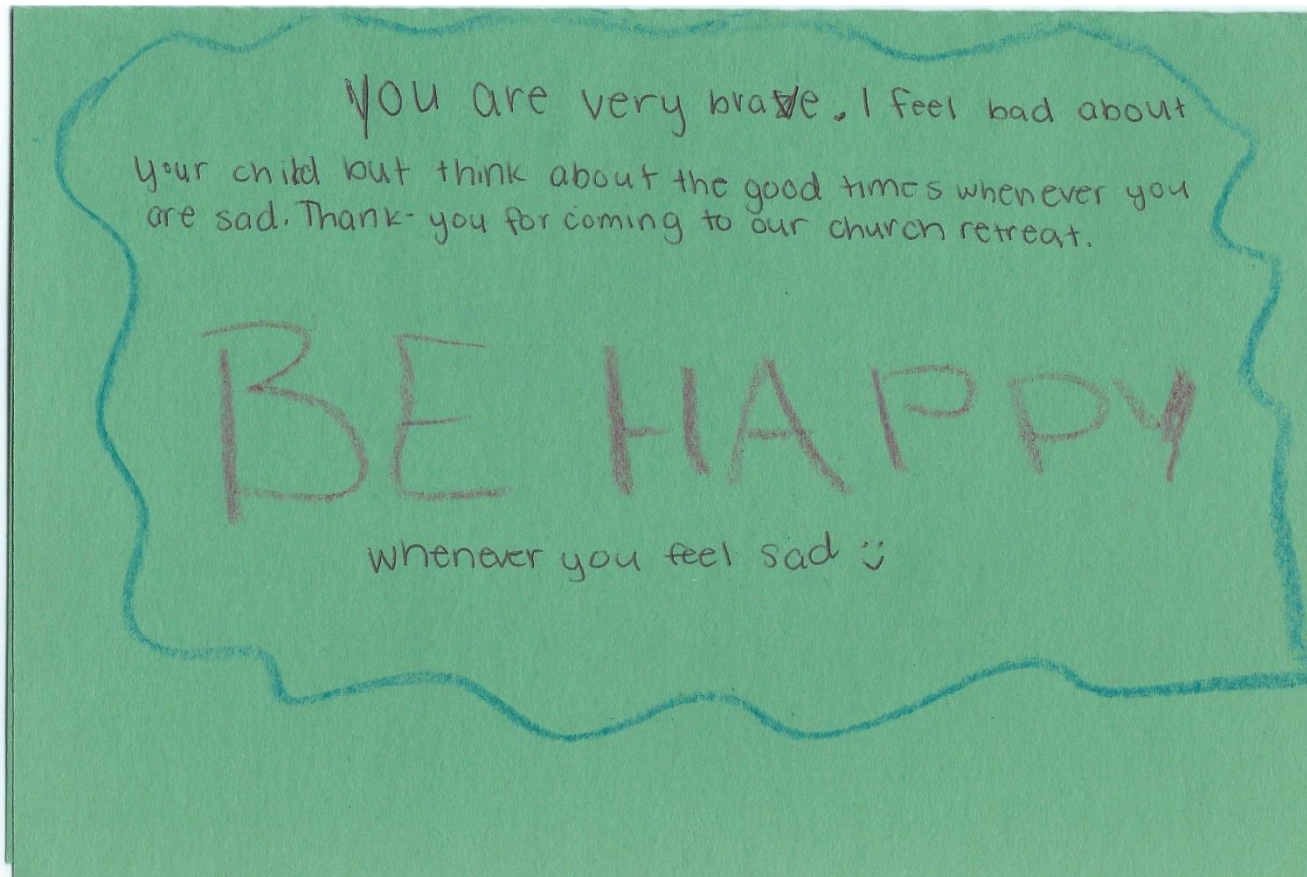
Then, for the first time ever, when it was time for Mass, we joined parishioners in a regularly scheduled Saturday vigil Mass. It was very moving for parishioners to see our candles and know that we were part of a special retreat at their church. They prayed for our children, by name, at the Mass, and were very cordial.

After a scrumptious dinner of lasagna wonderfully prepared by Lucille, we moved back into the chapel for our always touching Closing Prayer Service. During the service, which was introduced by a recording of “Angel” by Sarah McLaughlin, we were led in song once again by Barbara Murray and Liz Pedro.

We extinguished the wick of our candles, but not the light of our children that we carry within our hearts. Fr. Shemek sent us forth with a blessing and encouraged us to remember this Advent season, that while we wait in darkness, Light and Love will break through.

And so...

...another Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat ended.



Finding comfort after unbearable loss

Emmaus Bereavement Ministry to help R.I. parents cope with the death of a child



FINDING SOLACE: From left, Barbara Murray, of Tiverton; Joelle and Paul Elliot, of Montreal; and Peggy Hassett, of Chelmsford, Mass., remember their loved ones who have passed as they participate in a session at Miramar Retreat Center in Duxbury, Mass., this past weekend. The Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat will be offered at St. Theresa Church in Tiverton on Saturday, Nov. 21. All are invited to attend regardless of the age of the child lost or the amount of time passed.

RICK SNIZEK

Posted: Thursday, November 12, 2015 12:00 am

BY RICK SNIZEK, EDITOR

DUXBURY, Mass. — They came from near and far in search of healing through a very special ministry dedicated to providing comfort to parents who have lost a child.

In a chapel, amid the warm glow of candles, each labeled with the name of a child who has passed – from newborn through adult – parents gathered to remember their loved ones, sharing laughter, as well as tears.

In a corner near the windows, during a break between sessions of the weekend retreat, parents bond over the same heartbreak they both have experienced. A mother from Montreal leans in to comfort a mother from Tiverton, R.I., both knowing the feeling of loss in their lives.



Joelle Elliott at the Emmaus Ministry Weekend Retreat in Duxbury, MA

Joelle Elliott drove with her husband Paul to this seaside Massachusetts hamlet from their native Montreal after reading online about the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents.

This unique, Catholic ongoing program serving the spiritual needs of parents was started in 2009 by the Franciscan Friars at St. Anthony Shrine & Ministry Center in Boston, in collaboration with Diane and Charley Monaghan, who sought healing following the death of their son Paul in 2002.

The parents of three, the Elliotts lost their fourth child, Thomas, to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome on August 19. He was only five weeks old.

“It’s hard to get time to grieve and to think about all these things with the other three kids at home,” Joelle said of the opportunity for reflection on their loss afforded by the weekend retreat.

“So, just time being away and being together has been really helpful and seeing everybody else going through different, but similar things too, they understand and you don’t have to do anything. You can just be yourself. That’s really nice too.”

While the mother with whom she shared an embrace while holding candles lighted in remembrance of their departed loved ones traveled a much shorter distance to take part in the retreat, the journey for any parent who outlives a child is no less arduous.

Despite the very methodical way of thinking that Barbara Murray employs in her career as an engineer, she still finds it difficult to process the death of Melissa, her beloved daughter who died nearly two years ago at age 32, a loss she describes painfully as “sudden and accidental.”

Murray, a parishioner at St. Theresa Church in Tiverton, learned about The Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents and has now become involved as a team leader. Murray has been working with Father Przemyslaw “Shemek” Lepak, pastor of St. Theresa and St. Christopher parishes in Tiverton to make the program accessible locally.

On Saturday, Nov. 21, St. Theresa Parish, in cooperation with The Emmaus Ministry will offer a “One-Day Spiritual Retreat for Grieving Parents” at the church, 265 Stafford Road in Tiverton, from 9:30 a.m.-7:30 p.m. The retreat is open to anyone whose child of any age

has died by any cause, no matter how long ago. All are welcome, regardless of situation or religion.

Participants will share in several activities during the course of the day including a prayer service, candle lighting in memory of their loved one, small group sharing sessions, reflections and letter writing. They will also celebrate Mass together.

“It’s a beautiful ministry. I hope it will be helpful for many parents,” Father Shemek said.

The pastor said he knows from experience how difficult it is for a parent to have to cope with the death of a son or daughter, whether young or grown, having been called upon to help bring comfort to several parishioners through the years in their times of loss.

“They wonder, how can this event — the death of a loved one — be part of God’s plan?” he said. They can either hold it inside or share it and acknowledge the suffering and pain, and Father Shemek views the retreat as an opportunity for parents to seek healing from the hurt they have been holding inside.

“We all need this on many levels,” he said. “We don’t have all the answers, no human being does.”

Murray said that parents who suffer the loss of a child have both a physical and emotional part of themselves ripped away, along with all the hopes and aspirations they had completely invested in their child.

“Many well-intentioned attempts exist to assist parents in recovering from their loss, including psychotherapy and support groups,” Murray said. “However, in an attempt to be all-inclusive and ‘politically correct,’ the spiritual need — or even the existence of God — is absent from many of these resources.”

For more information, or to register for the Nov. 21 retreat at St. Theresa, Barbara Murray may be reached at 401-624-8746. For more information on other upcoming Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents programs, visit www.emfgp.org.

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