



Words! Words! Words!

All I hear are words... words... words... all the day through

--Eliza Doolittle, My Fair Lady

It was an exquisite, deep blue-sky morning when we headed to Plymouth, MA for our first-ever One-Day Retreat at St. Peter's Parish today. We were profusely thanking the Lord for not one, but two, retreats in January in New England this year with great weather. As it turned out, the weather was an omen for things to come.

This was a wonderful, grace-filled day that embraced 21 grieving parents, a parish-wide retreat team of volunteers, and our phenomenal Spiritual Leader, Fr. Bill Williams.

Parents came not only from Plymouth, but also Rowley, Braintree, Middleboro, Acushnet, Fairhaven, Rockland, Dorchester, Mendon, Kingston, and Waltham, MA—as well as Tiverton and Providence, RI.



We honored 20 children who have passed into eternal life due to drug overdose (8), illness (8), suicide (3), and accident (1). Age at the time of death ranged from 21 months to 55 years. Time since the death ranged from 5 months to 45 years ago.

Members of our retreat team included Fr. Bill Williams, Susanne, Larry, and Joey Conley, Mary Berry, Barbara Murray, Peter and Caroline Bertozzi, and Charley and Diane Monaghan, as well as Deacon Dick and Ann Cussen, St. Peter's Knitting Group, and music ministers, George Campeau and Linda LaRocco.

This retreat was unique in that Caroline Bertozzi, guided by the Holy Spirit, coordinated it completely on her own—without ever serving a major role on a retreat team before! She did a fantastic job of planning, organizing, and executing everything. Under her compassionate guidance, the retreat beautifully progressed throughout the day bringing peace and comfort to those in need.

All of our physical nourishment was provided by the “Conley Team” of Susanne, Larry, and Joey Conley. Throughout the entire day, the delicious food they provided was incredible. From Joe’s lunch and Larry’s corn chowder to Susanne’s fabulous ham and bean dinner, topped off by the best chocolate cake dessert ever, it was exactly the comfort food that we needed.

Susanne and Larry, who are members of St. Peter’s Parish, are also Emmaus Ministry Companions, who have participated in several retreats and provided this type of nourishment at other sites. They, along with their son, Joey, donated all of this love and support in memory of their three daughters: Maria, Abby, and Missy. Together, we humbly thank them.



After a very moving Opening Prayer Service during which we lit beautiful memorial candles, which were donated by Peter and Caroline Bertozzi, in memory of Nick, Fr. Bill welcomed us to St Peter’s and talked to us about grief.

He said many of us probably feel like the Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, who says, “Words. Words, Words. All I hear are words... words... words... all the day through.”

When we are dealing with the death of our precious children, we often just hear words... words... words from the funeral director, our church, our family, and our friends.

After some time and distance, Fr. Bill said, maybe some of these words can touch us more deeply and actually become spiritually transformative.

Fr. Bill encouraged us to examine our vision of God. Is he the “Tabulator” God who keeps count, like Santa Claus, ticking off when you are bad or good, so be good for goodness sake? Or is he the God of Love who welcomes you with outstretched arms?



Throughout his talk, Fr. Bill repeatedly spoke about our relationship with God...the juxtaposition of a God jabbing his finger at us and the God gently opening his arms to us. It is the God gently opening his arms to us who is the real God, said Fr. Bill... the God of Love, a father.

Death is not a state of being, said Fr. Bill. It is a step.... a step into eternal life. It is a single moment of transition. Life, for our children has changed, not ended.

The child you love, said Fr. Bill, is definitely in the hands of the Lord. We entrust our

children to God. He is taking very good care of them and holding them in the palm of his hand. As much as we love our children, God loves them even more. As unfathomable as that seems. We believe that the mercy of Our Lord will join us together again.

Trusting in the Lord; giving him our pain; believing in the resurrection of the dead; believing in the promise of eternal life and the life of the world to come is what gives us as Catholics and Christians tremendous hope. Hope and the courage as parents to go on, said Fr. Bill.

Fr. Bill then referenced “Open Hands” by Henri Nouwen and the image of approaching God with clenched fists vs. open hands. With open hands, he said, we can be open to many things, not the least of which are signs from God that our loved ones are truly alive and working in our lives.



He said that we should “look for hugs from God every day and believe that they will happen.” What a beautiful concept. Hugs from God in the form of seeing a beautiful tulip do what tulips do, smelling a fresh-brewed cup of coffee, savoring the giggle of a toddler...

Fr. Bill’s Reflection spurred a lively discussion afterwards on the questions of “Why me?” “Why my child?” He referenced Genesis and the fall of Adam and Eve, which had the domino-effect of agony and evil exponentially entering our lives.

There is also the “mystery of creation effect,” he said. Why were we born in America? Why do we live a comparatively stress-free life devoid of religious persecution, starvation, and natural disaster? Why we don’t live in Iraq or Syria, he said. It’s the “mystery of creation,” he said. We really don’t know.

We don’t know why there is injustice in this world. We don’t know why our children die. We don’t know why we are forced to endure horrific situations. We don’t know why life is so unfair for so many. All we can do is entrust our loved ones to the Lord.

Sometimes we only have a pinprick of the light of faith in our lives. We can work on having it slowly grow into a small flame. Choosing to believe, even if we don’t feel it, is a good thing, he said. Eventually this choice to believe may morph into true faith. And this “seatbelt of faith” may be the only thing that holds us together at times, he said.

Throughout the rest of the day, grieving parents shared their perspectives on their spiritual journeys. Not all of them were positive because that is just where we are in our relationships with God and with our children.

Comments from parents about their children included:

- *“She’s not hurting anymore. She is at peace, so I am at peace.”*
- *“Dark went away when I began to see the Light.”*
- *“After nine months of gestation, we were given a soul... a soul with eternal life that would never end.”*
- *“My epiphany: My daughter is in heaven and she is happy and that is that is all that matters.”*

In his homily at the Vigil Mass, Fr. Bill exhorted us to “recalibrate our spirituality (just like a cell phone that you turn upside down and around several times) often by asking, “What makes me happy? Where am I going? What is really important to me right now?”

For direction on what Jesus thought should make us happy, we should look at the beatitudes, said Fr. Bill. As Emmaus Ministry parents, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”* is particularly comforting.

About the day, parents had this to say:

- *“The participation of the parish was beautiful.”*
- *“These retreats are very healing and offer comfort.”*
- *“The Mass and candles and parish support touched my heart.”*
- *“Fr. Bill was wonderful.”*
- *“The food was delicious.”*

After a beautiful blessing from Fr. Bill sending us forth, another Emmaus Ministry spiritual retreat ended.

