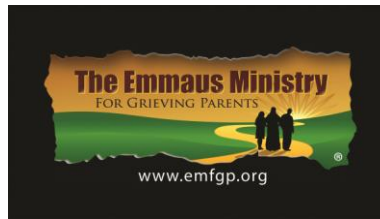


**FAMILY LIFE † RESPECT LIFE OFFICE
ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW YORK**



**One-Day Retreat
Saturday, February 11, 2017**

“THERE ARE NO COINCIDENCES IN LIFE”

A few years ago a very good priest friend of ours said to us with firm belief and total conviction, *“There are no coincidences in life.”* Then a religious sister gave us a stone on which that exact statement was etched. This proved to be especially true of our recent retreat offered in cooperation with the Archdiocese of New York on Saturday, February 11 at St. Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers.



The Thursday before the retreat, the entire East Coast had one of its worst blizzards of the season, followed by an even more paralyzing storm on Sunday. Sandwiched in between was a window of opportunity for 19 people to travel to and from the retreat safely—and to experience the very real presence of the Holy Spirit. There are no coincidences in life.

We welcomed 17 parents plus two retreat team members: 12 mothers and five fathers; 11 individuals and three couples. Almost all were from New York. Cities they came from included Eastchester, Garrison, Shrub Oak, the Bronx, Pelham, Pelham Manor, White Plains, North Salem, and Yonkers.

We honored 13 sons and two daughters. Two of the parents lost more than one child. Time since the death ranged from seven weeks ago (Christmas Day) to 42 years ago. Three of our children passed into eternal life during the past four months. It is heartbreaking to know that these children were alive when we started to plan this particular retreat.

Ages at death ranged from 10 days old to 49 years. Causes of death included illness, suicide, overdose, accident, violence, and unknown causes. Members of the retreat team included Sue DiSisto, Archdiocese of New York; Fr, Tom McNamara, O.F.M. Cap. of Garrison; and Deacon John Scarfi of St. John the Evangelist in Mahopac.

After the retreat team met briefly in prayer to ask the Holy Spirit for guidance and to prepare for the day, we gathered for a very moving Opening Prayer Service, during which we focused on Christ, the light of the world, and our children, the light of our lives.

Lighting the beautiful memorial candles reminded us that, like the light of our Lord Jesus Christ, the lights of our children live on today—and will live on forever. Concluding the Opening Prayer Service, we sang the “Emmaus Song,” asking our Risen Lord to “*Come journey with us.*”

Deacon John Scarfi offered a meaningful reflection, telling us he was motivated by his infant son, Matthew, who died 42 years ago at the age of ten days old, to come to this retreat and share his thoughts with us.



We were living before we were born, said Deacon John, in the womb. The womb prepared us for this life just as this life prepares us for the next life. If we really knew what heaven was like, we would never want to bring them back, he said. Heaven is where we all want to be... no more sorrow, no more pain. Knowing that our children are safe with the Lord and praying for us is very comforting, he said.

Deacon John encouraged us to look out beyond ourselves to see and to know that our children are fine, that Our Lord has them in his hands.

Charley Monaghan offered his thoughts on “*Why would a loving God let this happen to us?*” According to the Book of Wisdom, we had it all, said Charley. We had dominion over all creation, but we, through Adam and Eve, threw it all away. God did not create death, according to Wisdom. God did not take our children. Death took our children. Jesus Christ conquered death and saved our children, just as he saves us, said Charley. Our children are all now members of the Communion of Saints. And every time we go to Mass, we can feel their presence .

Fr. Tom McNamara talked about how Franciscans believe in “Sister Death.” Even though we walk in the shadow of death, we need not fear, said Fr. Tom. Your children will lift you up, he said.

After lunch we had a lively discussion on the topic of “Purgatory.” What it is and what it is not. Fr. Tom said he believes purgatory is purification, not punishment. Your children are not being punished, he said, just prepared. The Lord is kind and merciful, he said. He is preparing your children for the phenomenal kingdom to come.



One parent said she believes there are different stages of heaven and that Purgatory is one of them. Our children may need to work their way to a higher state of heaven, but they are there in the Communion of Saints, not matter what, she said. They are not suffering. As parents, we don't want our children to suffer after death. Purgatory is preparation, not suffering.

Charley offered the interesting perspective that purgatory is like showing up for a black tie event in shorts and a t shirt. You would feel the need to go home for a shower and a shave, he said. Deacon John said that he believes that it is a major job for each of us to pray for those in purgatory.

Throughout the day, we had several small and large group gatherings, as well as one-on one sessions. For many of us, it was a welcome opportunity to share, let down our guard, and be totally honest with other parents who “get it.” Almost nowhere else on the “outside” is this possible. To share stories of our children, our struggles, and parts of our spiritual journeys is a true gift and we are thankful for this ministry.

Throughout the day, comments, observations, and reflections of parents on their own spiritual journeys include...

- “Something I've read that I have found to be true... *'You see me from the outside; God sees from the inside.'*”
- “God doesn't have an Excel spreadsheet keeping track of rights and wrongs. Our God is a God of love, compassion, and mercy.
- “After the death of your child, you will be whole again, but never the same.”
- “I love my child's children, my grandchildren. After a visit, when I take them back home, there is another hole in my heart, another loss.”

- “We have to realize that we don’t all die when we are 90.”
- “Accepting this as God’s plan is very hard.”
- “I don’t believe it was God’s plan to take our children. But I do believe it is his plan to use this death for good. I just need to figure out how I can do that.”
- “It feels like he’s been ‘whited out’ of life. No one talks about him.”
- “When my son died, I realized he wasn’t mine to begin with. I’m just his mother.”
- “I don’t know where he is. I have to find him.”
- “The hardest thing to learn is that I really had no control over my son’s life—and never did.”

One parent told the story of a couple who worked day and night to have a street in their town named after their son. The son was a good person, but did not do anything out of the ordinary to benefit the town. Eventually, however, they were successful in having a street named.



When asked why this was so important to them, they said, *“Because at least once a day someone, somewhere, will say his name.”* We all agreed that this is particularly poignant to those of us whose children have passed many years ago. We sometimes feel as if the whole world has forgotten the absolutely beautiful presence of our children on this earth.

The retreat concluded with a wonderful Mass celebrated by Fr. Tom and a very moving Closing Prayer Service that included the Sacrament of Anointing. Fr. Tom blessed us and sent us forth, strengthened and emboldened to continue on our Emmaus journey, with Christ and our children holding us up on either side.

Afterwards, parents had this to say about the retreat:

- *“It was a great help and a great comfort. The day went by fast in a good way.”*
- *“It was wonderful to be around people who are experiencing the severity of your pain.”*
- *“It was helpful hearing other perspectives.”*
- *“I do feel 100% better than I have felt in a long time.”*
- *“It was very comforting. We didn’t have any expectations, so we were pleasantly surprised.”*

As we gathered to close this retreat, each of us reflected inwardly on how we were able to find comfort, not only from each other, but also from the Holy Spirit and from our children. We left St. Joseph's Seminary with confidence, knowing that there was a reason we were drawn to this retreat... a reason we were there at this particular time, at this particular place, with each other.

There are no coincidences in life.

