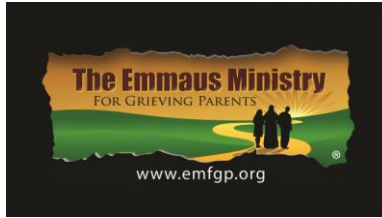


**FAMILY LIFE † RESPECT LIFE OFFICE  
ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW YORK**



***Keep Looking Ahead!***

Two weeks ago when we traveled to New York for our first Archdiocesan retreat, we had to work our way through a very short window between two major blizzards dumping lots of snow on the East Coast. On this travel day at the end of February, we enjoyed deep blue skies and 70 degree temperatures!



However, throughout the weekend, the weather—mirroring our mood, and the mood of our grieving parents—was unsettling. It went from the beautiful warmth and sunshine of Friday to the overcast, raw reality of Saturday morning, to a sliver of sun Saturday afternoon to driving rain, thunder, and lightning Saturday night. And, finally, we experienced the cool and crisp temperatures of a beautiful Sunday morning, full of hope and sunshine.

This particular retreat was our largest ever because we chose not to close registrations early. We welcomed 32 parents (seven couples and 18 individuals), most of whom were experiencing their first Emmaus Ministry retreat.

With the exception of retreat team parents, who came from MA and RI, all of our parents were from NY. They came from Yonkers, Yorktown Heights, Haverstraw, Long Island, Howard Beach, Cortland Manor, Staten Island, Bronxville, Millbrook, Bronx, Pelham, and Thornwood.



We honored 24 children: 18 sons and six daughters. Ages at the time of death ranged from several weeks in utero to 53 years old. Time since the death ranged from five weeks ago to 19 years ago. Nine of our parents experienced the painful death of their child in the last six months.

Causes of death included miscarriage, SIDS, SUDC (Sudden, Unexplained Death of a Child Older than 12 months), accident, illness, overdose, and suicide.

Members of the retreat team included Deacon Tom Nepl, Fr. Luis Saldano, Sue DeSisto, Dr. Kathy Withers, Marypat Hughes, John and Barbara Barry, Charley and Diane Monaghan, Barbara Hanley, Denise Carlucci, Tom & Tricia O'Brien, Beth Rapoza, and all Emmaus Ministry donors.

When asked before the retreat what they hoped to gain from the retreat, parents said:

*"I'm hoping to take away this feeling of guilt"*

*"A deeper, closer relationship with my Creator and also my son"*

*"Some sense of peace; we have 'spiritual paucity,' no sense of peace, just emptiness; we are not receiving anything from the church; we are completely bereft."*

*"I am looking for anything that gives me peace of heart."*

*And...*

*"I want to build a bridge to heaven."*

After a beautiful Opening Prayer Service during which we honored the light of our children in our lives and lit Memorial Candles in loving memory, Deacon Tom Nepl gave his Reflection.



Deacon Tom referenced the Emmaus story from the Gospel of Matthew when, at first, the disciples did not recognize that Jesus was indeed with them in their pain. "Just like the disciples, he doesn't criticize us in our anguish, but walks with us and shows us who he is. The breaking of the bread," he said, "signifies that, in the depths of our despair, Jesus will always be there to nourish us."



Deacon Tom talked about the close relationship Jesus has with his mother. He urged us to develop an intimate connection with Mary, because she definitely has the ear of her son, as do many mothers. Remember the marriage of Cana, he said, when Jesus said he was not ready, but Mary told the servants to “Do whatever he tells you.”

With those who have a very close relationship to his mother, Deacon Tom said, when you reach him, Jesus will say, “My mother has been telling me great things about you, and she wanted to meet you as soon as you arrived.”

Deacon Tom then read the beautiful poem, “Footprints in the Sand” and asked us to join him in the “Prayer of St. Francis,” focusing on the powerful message that “...In

dying, we are all born into eternal life.”

We progressed through the day with eloquent “Parent Witnessing” from Marypat Hughes and John Barry.

Marypat described her beautiful son, Tom, as fun loving and the “glue” that continues to hold her family together. He was the person in school who suggested a fundraiser where boys could wear skirts to school! Marypat’s message was extremely inspiring. Throughout her many trying experiences, she continues to see so many blessings in her life. She finds deep comfort in the Mass and in her faith. To those who ask, “Why,” she has concluded, “Why not?”

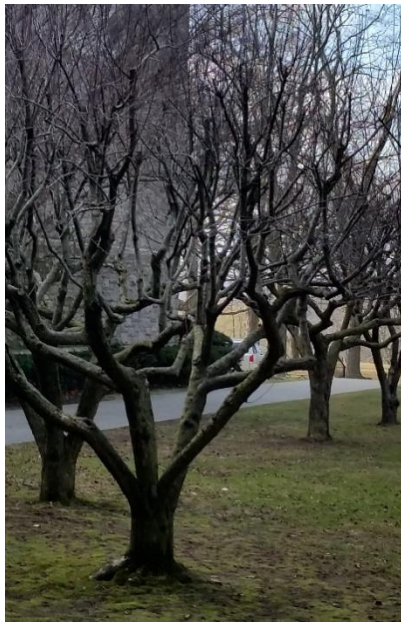
Next, John Barry shared where he is on his spiritual journey after the death of his beautiful son, Mike, by suicide, almost five years ago. For a long time he struggled with the question of where God was in the death of his son, just as those who lost loved ones in 9-11 struggled with the same question. Jesus was in the towers that day, he said, just as he was with our son when he died. Choose to let this nightmare make your heart tender, John encouraged us, not harder. John then shared a quote from Edna St. Vincent Millay: “Life goes on...I just forget why.”



Throughout the rest of the day, parents had the opportunity to explore their personal spiritual journeys by themselves, with others in one-on-one sessions, and in small and large group gatherings.

One session that seemed to resonate particularly with this group of parents was “Letter Writing.” This is always a very moving part of the day during which parents write letters to their children... to God... to whomever... expressing their thanks...their regrets... their joys or sorrows... what they may not have been able to express before.

“I talk to him all the time,” said one parent,” but writing this letter and knowing that it would be mixed with the incense and offered in prayer was very powerful,” she said. Out of the utmost respect, these heartfelt letters were later burned and offered, with incense, during the Mass.



Fr. Luis Saldano’s homily at our Vigil Mass was particularly thought provoking. He talked about how next month his parents would mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of his little brother, their son who died as a five-year-old. “Use your grief to become transformed,” he said. “Keep looking ahead...to the joys and happiness of eternal life that is sure to come.”

“Initial grief,” he said, “is like a teeming fountain of water pouring its unending pulsation of grief over and over us again and again. Eventually, with faith and trust in the Risen Lord, we are able...like Mary in the Pieta, to transform our sorrows into hope and joy.”

As the retreat was drawing to a close, parents commented ...

*“It gave me peace, healing, and closure.”*

*“It was very helpful in emphasizing my own need for God.”*

*“I found peace for awhile.”*

*“Although it was emotional and difficult, it was a positive and wonderful experience to share with others in our grief journey,”*

*“It was a reminder how people can touch your life in just one day and help ease your grief.”*

Mirroring the unsettled weather of this day, we gathered together in the beginning not knowing what to expect, but by the end of the day, we left feeling a sense of



peace, comfort, hope—and camaraderie. As Charley said, “You can laugh with acquaintances, but you cry only with family and friends.” On this day, many of us made lots of friends.

