



St. Anthony Shrine & Ministry Center



***“Darkness makes us look even harder for the light.
We can choose to walk in the light; we need not walk in darkness.”***

It was frigid, but clear and beautiful on the Saturday we gathered in the “upper room” of St. Anthony Shrine & Ministry Center last week on March 11.



Having an Emmaus Ministry retreat on the fifth floor of this Franciscan Friary in many ways feels like going back “into the womb.” It is a warm and loving place that offers comfort as soon as you enter. Those of us who have been there before knew what to expect and looked forward to it eagerly. Those of us who were new felt the peace almost instantly.

Parents who joined us came from MA, NH, and RI. We honored children who died from illnesses, accidents, overdoses, and suicide. Ages at death ranged from 10 years to 49 years old. Time since the death ranged from one year to 16 years.

When asked what they hoped to obtain from the retreat, parents said they were looking for peace of mind and comfort; knowledge that our children are at peace in heaven; affirmation that we will see our children again; and a strengthened faith in God.

Members of the Retreat Team included Fr. Joe Quinn, OFM, Fr. John Hogan, OFM, Fr. Tom Conway, OFM, Fr. Hugh Hines, OFM, Dotty and Paul McLaughlin, Barbara Murray, Claire Michlovitz, Tom & Tricia O’Brien, Beth Rapoza, and Charley and Diane Monaghan.

After a very moving Opening Prayer Service, we met in the Friary Library for a thought-provoking Reflection from Fr. Joe. Before he began, Fr. Joe told us about his own background. His parents had five beautiful little boys, of which he was one. Tragically, as he was growing up, his own parents

experienced the death of not one, not two, but three of their precious sons. Only Fr. Joe and one of his brothers remain. He saw how it devastated his parents every day. Then, sadly, Fr. Joe lost both of his parents at the same time. He was called to celebrate a funeral Mass with the caskets of both his father and his mother. Through his own personal experiences and ministering to others, Fr. Joe shared what he had learned with us. Here are some quotes from his talk...

“When you hear nobody dies from a broken heart, it comes from somebody who has never experienced the death of a child.”

“There is no more devastating loss than the death of a child.”

“Parental grief is different from other losses—it is more intense, mystifying, exaggerated, lengthened, and complex. The death of your child is the most traumatic experience you will ever have to face. Life will never be the same again.”



“Please continue to remind yourself that there is no time limit on the grief you live with.”

“In *Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker wrote that there are two events in life we often shy away from discussing. The first one is birth... how we come into the world, born through our human intimacy and sexuality; and the second is death... how we leave this world.”

“WHY? We know that God was not the force behind the death of your child. God would never take a human life just to leave parents to suffer and replay in their hearts and minds the lifelong pain of loss. God does not will death or suffering.”

“To people who say, ‘It was the will of God,’ let me be perfectly clear... God did NOT will for us to suffer. God’s tears are mixed with our tears.”

“Just as no earthly parent would ever will the death of their own child, neither would God wish this horrific situation on his children.”

“Perhaps the greatest evil in this world is the death of a child... This is the most obvious disorder of a world that is disordered.”

“From the writings of the 17th Century German mystic, Angelus Silesius, we hear:

*Love like a magnet is, it draws me into God,
And what is greater still, it pulls God into death.”*

“Can the power of love overcome ‘the last of all evils, which is death?’ The resurrection of Jesus and his presence in us is the answer. The very resurrection of Jesus destroys death forever.”

“Your child’s earthly life has ended and it invites each of us into the Kingdom where we are reminded that there is no more pain, suffering, tears, or death that can ever separate us again. God gently and tenderly welcomed your child safely home.”

“When life is overwhelming, pray to your child....not *for* him...but *to* him.”

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After a short break, we returned to the Friary Library to hear the moving parent witnessing of Dotty McLaughlin, followed by a vibrant discussion. We talked about tears... how we are afraid or embarrassed to cry...how our tears are good, cathartic, needed...how the DNA of tears of grief is different from other tears. How our tears are gifts from God to wash our eyes to see his love. “:When you share your pain with others,” Dotty said, “that’s when the healing takes place...When you are Christ to another person and share your pain, you receive far more than you give.”

Following that we met in small groups of mothers and fathers, then joined together for another vibrant discussion of insights we thought were particularly interesting.

One parent stated her belief that the Catholic Church is very good about teaching us how to get to heaven, but not good at all about teaching us how to deal with death... how to live after one we have loved has passed into eternal life. We agreed that the Church has much work to do in this area.

The afternoon seemed to fly by as we walked and talked one-on-one with each other during our Emmaus Walk. Many Emmaus walkers extended their conversations well into the next session.

Fr. Joe then celebrated an absolutely beautiful Mass of Thanksgiving during which we focused on the Transfiguration of Christ—and the transfiguration of our lives through the love of our children... allowing the Spirit to work through us and through our pain. “In time we will all be totally transfigured,” said Fr. Joe, “and no one will take our dear children away ever again.”

The Closing Prayer Service was particularly meaningful as we gathered around the altar in a semi-circle.

Fr. Joe anointed each of us through the Sacrament of Anointing. Each of us received the laying on of hands from each of the many friars who joined us at this Prayer Service. When friars do this, each touch on our heads is completely different and very comforting in its own way. Some friars pray aloud, others silently. Some touch lightly, others very definitely. Feeling the Holy Spirit course through your body as each friar “lays on his hands” is palpable.

After the retreat, parents had this to say...

“I enjoyed talking with the friars at breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“Fr. Joe was a wonderful teacher and speaker...very inclusive.”

“This retreat gave me a lot to think about.”

“Absolutely beautiful. Very helpful.”

“What a wonderful, grace-filled day! As always, it was a great blessing to be in what feels like my “second home!”

“Fr. Joe’s reflection was lovely and the Mass was so comforting.”

“I was in need of this uplifting day.”

“Continue to explain spiritual direction and ideas of what to do after the retreat is over.”

When it was time for the retreat to end, it seemed too soon. Many of us didn’t want to leave. But we felt buoyed by the compassion of the friars, of each other, and of the day... strengthened with hope and resolve to make it through whatever comes next.

