

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

**Church of the Magdalene
Pocantico Hills, New York**



**ONE-DAY RETREAT
April 1, 2017**

“God’s Will? Never!”

Weather doesn’t always play a significant factor in our retreats, but, for some reason, it did with our three recent Archdiocese of New York (ARCHNY) retreats—probably because some of us traveled a greater distance than normal to reach them.

Amid lots of ominous forecasts of a major late winter snowstorm in New England, we set out for New York on Friday morning for our third retreat at the Church of the Magdalene in Pocantico Hills in Tarrytown on April 1.



The usually pleasant three-hour drive morphed into a harrowing four-hour ordeal. We had no snow, but lots of wind, driving rain, and very low visibility. As we “white knuckled it,” I had the overwhelming feeling that we were not alone... that there was someone else in the car with us. I pictured the Jesus of our logo sitting between the driver and passenger seats with one hand on each of our backs, pulling us through what seemed like an endless passage. And then we were there.

We welcomed a wonderful group of 31 parents to this very special retreat: 24 new and seven returning, including five parents on the retreat team. One NY parent has come to all three ARCHNY retreats because she has found each one of them comforting in a different way.

New parents at this retreat came from three states: NY, NJ, and CT. NY cities they came from included the Bronx, Ossining, Yonkers, Congers, Brooklyn, New

City, Warwick, Scarsdale, Manhattan, Somers, Pelham, Chestnut Ridge, and Rockaway Park.

We honored 25 children. Ages at death ranged from stillbirth to 66 years. Time since the death ranged from only 12 weeks ago to 42 years ago in 1975. Seven of our parents lost their children in the past three months. Three of our parents lost more than one child. Causes of death included illness (11), suicide (6), accident (2), Overdose (2), Murder (2), Drowning (1), and Unknown (1).



Members of the Retreat Team included Fr John Vigilanti, Pastor of the Church of the Magdalene; Fr. Michael Greco, OFM CAP (who heard confessions almost all day long); Sue DiSisto and Dr. Kathy Withers of ARCHNY; Marypat Hughes, Emmaus Parent Companion from NY; Beth and Andy Culhane, Charley and Diane Monaghan, Tom and Tricia O'Brien, and Beth Rapoza, Emmaus Parent Companions from MA; Ed Muller and Church of the Magdalene Volunteers.

After a very emotional Opening Prayer Service during which parents lit Memorial Candles for their children, we had a thought-provoking Reflection from Fr. Vigilanti.

For this part of the day, we gathered in the absolutely beautiful Church of the Magdalene with its striking stained glass windows and instant warmth. Fr. Vigilanti invited us to feel the heartfelt embrace of the church throughout the retreat. "Feel the comfort and inspiration of your surroundings," he said. Indeed, whenever we entered the elegant country church, it did feel like a comforting womb or even a peaceful tomb.

Powerfully quoting Scripture, Fr. Vigilanti told us that 31 miracles in the Gospels involve Jesus encountering someone who asks for healing.

"There is no timeline for your grief," said Fr. Vigilanti. "The man at the pool in Bethsaida lived with his suffering for 38 years...the hemorrhaging woman lived with her affliction for 12 years. How long does it take to be healed from our grief? There is no timeline. We journey at our own pace. None of us have the right to say to another that they should 'move on,'" he said.

"Often people will say to you about the death of your child... 'It was God's will.' Your child's death had absolutely nothing to do with God's will," said Fr. Vigilanti. "I don't believe that for one minute. If I believed that God caused the

death of your child or willed you to be hurt or torn apart in grief, I could never celebrate a Mass or be a priest. No way can this be possible,” he said.

Not coincidentally, the gospel for this day was John’s accounting of the raising of Lazarus. Fr. Vigilanti talked about Jesus not hurrying to Bethany when he was told of the death of Lazarus. Why didn’t he “book it” back right away after the rebuke of Mary that her brother had died because Jesus was not there? “Because Jesus knew he could—and would—raise Lazarus from the dead,” said Fr. Vigilanti.



Jesus said to Mary, “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me shall not die.” To us 2000 years later, he says, “Do you believe in me?”

“When things are going well,” said Fr. Vigilanti, “it is easy to say, ‘Yes, I do believe.’ But when we are in crisis like dealing with the death of our precious children, it is not so easy. We have to search our souls for answers to the question ‘What do I really believe?’ It takes a great deal of faith and courage to say, ‘I believe.’”

“Believing in the life, death and resurrection of Christ can transform your hurt into healing,” said Fr. Vigilanti. “In times like this, our religion is what we hold onto. It is what we do. It is how we enter the communion of saints and enter into communion with God and with our children.”

“God lost his only son in a horrific way,” said Fr. Vigilanti. “He knows your pain. But through his death and resurrection, he conquered death forever. He is with us in our pain. He doesn’t want our pain any more than we do. It is not God’s will that our children die. They do not die because he wants to take them away from us so they can be with him in heaven. What he does want is that we share with him our total desolation so that he can give to his total comfort and grace-filled healing.”

After lunch we heard from two very moving Parent Witnesses on where they are currently in their spiritual journeys after the death of their children.

Marypat Hughes spoke eloquently of her beautiful son, Tom. The combination of a high powered job, easily obtainable narcotics, dirty drugs, and long hours and long days proved to be a lethal combination leading to the death of her highly successful investment banker son. “In 2015,” said Marypat, “there were more than 53,000 opiod deaths in the United States. What are we doing about it?” she asked.



Charley Monaghan spoke of the life and death of his only son, Paul. He said he was forced to question, “What do I really believe? Is there really life after death? Is my son still alive? Will I ever see him again?” After 14 years of these questions, Charley said, his resounding answer to all of them is “Yes!” He has found peace and comfort in the

teachings of the Catholic Church and believes—without a doubt—that our children are alive and well and each of us will definitely see them again. Life has changed, not ended.

Throughout the day we had ample opportunity to share our stories with each other—or not, if we preferred. There were one-on-one, small group, and large group sessions.

Comments from parents throughout the day included...

“My confession with Fr. Greco was the best confession I have had in the past 20 years. He didn’t leave me off the hook.”

“Fr. Vigilanti ‘gets it.’ What he said was so comforting.”

“I feel happiness at times, but the tears take it all away.”

“It is comforting for me to come to these (NY) retreats. Every one is the same, but different. I learn a different perspective at each one and take away something meaningful.”

“Charley’s summary of a previous priest’s Reflection is why I am here today. He said, “God didn’t take your child. Death took your child. Jesus Christ—through his own death—took your child from death and gave him back to you.”

Many of my friends have said to me, “It was God’s will.” I want to lash out at them and say, “How could a loving God will my daughter to die?!” Fr. Vigilanti said, “The death of a child is never God’s will.” I will hold onto that.

A wonderful part of the day was going to the Saturday Vigil Mass of the Church of the Magdalene with all of the parishioners. Fr. Vigilanti explained to everyone who we were and why we were there. The Music Ministry chose hymns especially for us. And Fr. Vigilante’s homily was particularly meaningful.

When Jesus went to raise Lazarus, he said to those near the tomb, “Roll back the stone. Untie him and set him free.” “What are the *stones* in our lives?” asked Fr. Vigilanti. “What do we need to be untied from? What is keeping

us from a closer relationship with our God? Confront these stones in the sacrament of Reconciliation,” suggested Fr. Vigilanti, “and roll them back.”

After a wonderful dinner served by a group of very dedicated volunteers, we had a beautiful Closing Prayer Service. Sadly we extinguished the wicks of our children’s Memorial Candles, but we left richer in the peace and comfort we gained this day—and with the many new-found friendships with other caring parents who “get it.”

At the Closing Prayer Service, Fr. Vigilanti reiterated that he was honored and humbled to have joined us in this retreat. He thanked parents for giving him new insights and appreciation for the depths of our experiences as grieving parents. He said it would help him be a better priest. He also said he hoped that this retreat at the Church of the Magdalene would become a paradigm for other parishes in ARCHNY. And he encouraged parents to personally contact him at any time should they need his help.

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

“We built a community of compassion and understanding. Thank you for this special day.”

“My children died many years ago, so I have had much time to walk with Jesus. But I found a forgiveness that I needed here today.”

“The pace allowed me to think about my feelings and how to grow in the future.”

“Very nurturing. I treasured it.”

“Thank you for your support, courage, and wisdom throughout the day in dealing with this horrific pain we endure after losing our babies. I am humbled, blessed, and grateful.”

In humble thanksgiving, we are grateful for the Holy Spirit for all of his work with the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents in the Archdiocese of New York. Not knowing where we will go from here, we trust Him to guide us and, as always, we wait for his call.

