

**SACRED HEART OF MARY
ST JOSEPH THE WORKER
WEIRTON, WV**



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

“There is More to Life Than This World.”

The forecast called for hazy, hot, and humid weather as we headed to Sacred Heart of Mary Parish (SHM) in Weirton for our third retreat in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, WV on Saturday. Instead, we were greeted by driving rain in the morning that eventually turned into a beautiful, sunny day.



Twenty-two people gathered in SHM’s Parish Hall, thirteen of whom were grieving parents with an additional nine volunteers from this vibrant parish. Members of the retreat team included Fr. Dennis Schuelkens, pastor of Sacred Heart of Mary and St. Joseph the Worker (and nephew of Charley and Diane Monaghan), who walked with us through the entire day from beginning to end as Host, Spiritual Leader, Celebrant, Confessor, and friend; Deacon Vince Olenick; Maureen Kerr, Office Manager and On-Site Retreat Coordinator; Betty Fiedorczyk, Hospitality Coordinator; and Peg Thomaselli, Dr. Mitchell and Jennifer Sagan, Marie Weigel, and Marge Dziazkowicz, donors and volunteers.

Emmaus Parent Companions included Kay Margocee. and Dale and Rosemary Michael, as well as Charley and Diane Monaghan. Kay and Charley served as Parent Witnesses. Tom and Tricia O’Brien provided Comfort Crosses in Loving Memory of their daughter, Marisol; Rob and Krista Skinner provided the memorial candles in loving memory of their son Aidan (AJ).

We welcomed parents not only from Weirton, but also from Charleston, Fairmont, and Burgettstown and Carnegie, PA. We honored 10 children who had died. Age at death ranged from stillbirth to 53 years old. Time since the death ranged from eight months to 14 years ago. Cause of death included illness, accident, suicide, and overdose.

Throughout the day, we received physical nourishment from a dedicated team of volunteers from these vibrant parishes. Coming and going all day long, they joyfully gave their time and talent to minister to our needs. In addition to all of the preparation beforehand, they worked tirelessly from 8am until well after 8pm on Saturday.



Our Opening Prayer Service took place in SHM Church, which is a beautiful, sacred space. One parishioner remarked that Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Bishop Michael Bransfield has said that, for him, entering this church feels like entering the Sacred Heart of Mary. To many, it does.

Fr. Dennis gave a particularly moving Reflection on *“There is More to Life Than This World.”* The loss of a child is the greatest loss anyone can experience, said Fr. Dennis as he began. We can be tempted to shake our fists and blame God. This is ok, he said, because feelings are a gift and if we don’t express them, we will repress them and will not be able to communicate at all. He suggests we ask ourselves often, *“How am I really feeling?”*

Fr. Dennis then talked about a recent experience he had with a young couple who had just found out that the child the mother was carrying was an encephalitic baby boy. Doctors strongly recommended abortion because the child was certain to die prematurely. The parents said no.

Instead they chose a name for their child that meant *“fighter.”* They prayed for a miracle, but in their eighth month of pregnancy, their beautiful baby boy was stillborn. Fr. Dennis delivered the homily at his funeral.

“There is more to life than this world,” he told the parents. The purpose of this life, according to the Catholic Church, is to ready ourselves for the next life. We are a resurrected people. This world is not an end unto itself, he said.

In the next life you will see your beautiful son again, he told the couple. And he will thank you for not giving up on him. He will tell you he has been praying for you and that he has been with God all this time.



An encephalitic child is definitely not God’s perfect will, said Fr. Dennis. With God’s perfect will, there is no illness and no suffering. But, because of original sin, disorder has entered our idyllic world.

As grieving parents, we particularly worry about our children who have succumbed to suicide, addiction, and other poor choices in their lives. These children are definitely with God, no matter what, said Fr. Dennis.

To be separated from God, three things need to have happened, he said:

1. Their sin had to be of a grave nature, i.e. mortal sin
2. They had to have absolute clarity that their sin was of a grave nature.
3. They had to be in full possession of their own free will and deliberately choose to be separated from God.

Absent any of the above, they are not separated from God. Because they did not make their choices in full possession of their faculties—and did not willfully choose separation, they continue to be in union, said Fr. Dennis.

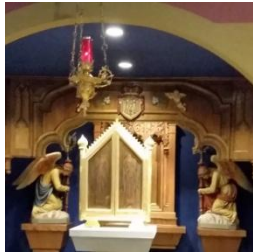
On earth their hearts were restless and, as parents, our hearts were restless as we struggled to help them. Take comfort, said Fr. Dennis, because your child’s heart is no longer restless. It now rests in Christ. “Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they rest in you,” said St. Augustine. And, as Jesus said in John 14, “I am the peace the world cannot give.”



As you walk into the church upstairs and look at your child’s

candle, said Fr. Dennis, find hope in Jesus Christ and the fact that your child's heart, no matter how he/she died, is no longer restless. This is the teaching of the Catholic Church.

As grieving parents, this belief in the peace of our children requires "supernatural faith." The Church can help us, he said but we need to open our eyes of faith.



It is kind of like milk, he said. If you have a glass of white milk and you want to make chocolate milk, one way is to add lots of chocolate syrup. But, after adding the syrup, it still looks like white milk. You need to stir the chocolate syrup to mix it into the white milk to have chocolate milk. This is like our faith, he said. Sitting dormant, nothing happens. You have to stir your faith. That is, you have to work on it to increase it and to increase your capacity for faith.

Fr. Dennis went on to ask...

Did God want my child to die? No!

Is God with my child? Yes!

Is my child with God? Yes!

We need to reframe our thinking according to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Our children are still very much alive. They may have moved on to a new life, but they are still very much alive. And they are still very much participating in our lives. Some days, however, it is much easier to remember this than others, he acknowledged. Some days...many days... we can only "plow through."

Several parents had interesting reactions after Fr. Dennis' thought-provoking reflection. One parent noted that it is an easy, natural reaction to blame... blame God, blame ourselves, and blame others. But life happens. It is not God. He said he doesn't have the past any more or the future, so he tries to focus on the present.

Another parent observed that she used to always question why children get cancer. In her life as a health care professional she has watched many children get sick and die. But, she said, we all have to die. Some of us die sooner than others and we can't understand it. We don't understand how it will all eventually work out. She

said she has come to peace with the death of her son. Her faith has helped her realize that he was and is a beautiful being whose life touched many people and despite his death, continues to touch many people.

Parent witnessing (during which parents who have been to previous retreats share where they are in their spiritual journeys—good or bad—) is always an interesting session of the retreat.

Our first parent witness talked about how she believed it was because of God's mercy that her son died. He struggled so hard in life, she said, that she could never wish him back. I do know that something good will come from his death, she said. I am better spiritually now than I have ever been, she said.

Our father parent witness talked about having his son in a box after he died, not dealing with the death for years. Gradually he came to realize that, rationally, his son was with God. But that 18 inches (as a friar once said) from your head to your heart is an extremely difficult journey. I had to *feel* my son's salvation, not just *know* it rationally. Eventually I was able to do that, he said.

We can't know what is really happening in heaven and on earth while we are here, a parent observed. According to Bishop Robert Barron, he said, it is like a pointillist painting that you are standing right in front of and trying to photograph. All you and the camera will see are dots. However, if you move back and have some perspective, you will see the beautiful painting of an idyllic French countryside picnic, which is totally impossible to discern close by. So it is with God's plan for us.



Later, mothers and fathers separated into groups. Several mothers talked about the fact that our children are part of the Communion of Saints and how comforting it is to receive the Eucharist. Among other things, they also discussed the idea of whether or not our children are resting in peace or at work in our lives.

Fathers struggled with deep feelings of guilt and their perceptions of not being able to protect their children.

Then we talked about how perfectly happy we will all be in heaven. Since perfect happiness would have to include our precious children, we agreed that they will be with us in heaven together with our perfect union with God. Fr. Dennis said that St. Thomas Aquinas suggested that we will all be the age of perfection, 33 years old, when our glorified bodies are resurrected. (However, Fr. Dennis is hoping for 24 years old!) Someday we shall see.

During the Vigil Mass, parents sat together in reserved seating as the congregation joined us in prayer. Fr. Dennis' homily focused on the need to create space in our lives for God. One of the best ways to do this is prayer, he said.

If you say that you pray off and on all day long, you probably aren't really praying, he said. What is needed is a specific time and place that you give to God... a *created space* during which you focus on increasing your faith and love of God. For those of us who heard his morning reflection, we recognized that this would be a good example of "stirring the milk" of our faith.



After the Vigil Mass and a delicious dinner prepared by the parish volunteers, Fr. Dennis led our Closing Prayer Service. He gave us a beautiful blessing sending us forth... reminding us that our children *will* live forever; their hearts are restless no more; and one day we *will all* be together again in perfect love and union with God.

Overall, it was a beautiful, grace-filled day. After the retreat, parents had this to say...

- *"Please come back to WV soon! We need this now more than ever!"*
- *"It seemed like such a long day and I was worried about it, but now it doesn't seem so long after all."*
- *"It was more than I expected."*
- *"Some of my hurtful feelings were talked about, giving me understanding and relief from that hurt."*
- *"Another talk by Fr. Dennis on heaven and the Communion of Saints and the Church's teachings would have been helpful."*
- *"The ministry provides comfort through sharing our pain. This is truly a gift from God."*

As we humbly and sincerely thanked the Holy Spirit for this wonderful opportunity to return to WV after several years away, yet another Emmaus Ministry retreat ended.

