



“I Don’t Blame God; I’m Too Busy Blaming Myself”

For weeks our January 20th retreat in Plymouth, MA—and up until the Saturday before—only two parents were registered. We asked... Is January a bad time for retreats? Do enough parents know about it? Should we consider rescheduling it? Are we doing something wrong? After lots of prayers to the Holy Spirit, everything changed.

Beginning on Sunday, we started to receive 2-3 registrations every day right up until the retreat’s opening on Saturday morning and ended up welcoming 17 parents, not only from Plymouth, but also Braintree, Quincy, Dorchester, Rockland, Weymouth, Boxborough, and Waltham. Thank you, Holy Spirit!

We honored 14 children whose age at the time of death ranged from 8 months old to 35 years old. All but one child was in his/her 20’s or 30’s. One parent commented that, in addition to losing a child, we all had much more in common. Was there a reason we were all drawn together on this day at this time?

Time since the death ranged from three months ago to 47 years ago. Proof that the holes in our hearts share a deep commonality, no matter how long it’s been since the loss of our precious children. We have experienced the most horrific challenge that life can hand us. The common denominator among grieving parents is very real. This grief is very different from any other type or form of grief.

More than half of our children died by overdose. Other causes of death included car and motorcycle accidents, illness, and suicide.

The retreat opened, as always, with a very poignant prayer service during which we focused on the meaning and symbolism of light. *“Your sun will no longer set; nor will your moon wane. For you will have the Lord for everlasting Light. And the days of mourning will be over.”* (Isaiah 60:20).

Particularly moving was the closing hymn, *“It Is Not Death to Die,”* reminding us...

It is not death to fling
Aside this earthly dust
And rise with strong and noble wing
To live among the Just.
It is not death to hear
The key unlock the door
That sets us free from mortal years
To praise you everywhere.

Fr. Bill Williams, a true friend and supporter of the Emmaus Ministry, gave a grace-filled reflection. When you consider Scripture, he said, these people in the Bible are us. Considering the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they are so much like us, grieving parents, on our own spiritual journey. We don't understand. We grieve deeply. We thought we knew, but now everything is in question. Our savior has been taken from us so violently. Where did all of his teachings and good work and promises of dominance get him—and us? Everything he taught us is gone.



When he broke the bread, however, it all became clear. He is alive! All that he taught is true. When the disciples rushed back to Jerusalem to tell everyone that they had seen the risen Jesus, the apostles enthusiastically replied that they, too, had seen him.

In all of their sadness and brokenness, Jesus finds them and walks with them, gently reminding them that life is eternal.

Just as he was with his disciples and apostles back then, Jesus is with you today, said Fr. Bill. He will remind you of what you already know. He will strengthen your heart. And you will believe again.

Fr. Bill talked about Martha and Mary and the death of their dear brother, Lazarus. *“I believe Scripture gives us the edited version,”* said Fr Bill. Martha was really angry at Jesus. She said, *“Where were you? If you had come when I called, my brother would still be alive. Dammit, I am mad at you. Why did this have to happen? Why didn't you come?”*

Jesus replied, *“I am the resurrection and the Light. Whoever believes in me will never die.”* And he brought Lazarus back to life.

Fr. Bill emphasized that it is ok to be mad at God. He can take it. We can tell him how we really feel. You can day “dammit” to God. Sometimes we can take our anger and put it in a pot and put a lid on it, said Fr. Bill. This is often the case at funerals. Just getting through the day is a feat, he said, Very often families can't hear or comprehend the comforting words of faith

offered at Catholic funerals... That life has *changed*, not ended. That death is really *birth into eternal life*, and that we will *definitely* see our children again.

After time and distance, said Fr. Bill, hopefully, we are able to hear and understand these words of comfort.

This is the mission of the Emmaus Ministry... to reiterate these words of comfort over and over again to brokenhearted parents who may have never heard them before—or who need to hear them repeated again and again.

“What is your image of God?” asked Fr. Bill. Most people would say it is the “*Gotcha God*,” who, like Santa Claus, watches you day and night to note in a book whether you have been naughty or nice. The true God is not like that, said Fr. Bill. He is a God of mercy who welcomes us—and welcomes our children—with love. “*I have brought them home. They are ok.*”

Fr. Bill emphasized that the holes in our hearts will one day be filled—and healed. He will turn the torment of Good Friday into the new life of Easter. Your children, right now, he said, are experiencing God’s peace and love. “They would never want to come back,” said one of the parents, “Nor would we.”



Today, as you progress through this retreat, said Fr. Bill, “be open to that small voice deep inside of you. Let your heart be open to the presence of your child—and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Let your heart be open to the peace, hope, and love that is being given to you this day.

I know that it is really hard to trust in God, he said. In no way do I equate this with what you are experiencing, he said. But I am getting ready to retire from active ministry work. I have no idea of what this means or where this will take me and I am, frankly, very scared. I have to learn to practice what I preach and trust in the Lord. So I know somewhat of your pain. It is very hard to totally trust in the Lord.

We had plenty of opportunities throughout the day to connect with each other individually, in small and large groups—and together with our children in prayer.

Parents commented that...

“There are moments when I am transported either mentally or through a dream when I see her so clearly and know, without a doubt, that she is so very happy. Then I come back to reality and wonder and question all that I have seen. I believe it is Satan who causes me to question. It is Satan who doesn’t want me to have peace.”

Another parent stated his belief that Satan loves to enter the lives of grieving parents because they can be so easy to convert to his cause. It is Satan, he said, who gives you all of those layers of guilt. It is Satan who causes you to question your spouse's grief journey and ask why it isn't the same as yours. It is Satan who tries to convince you that death is the end and that the promise of eternal life is a myth and doesn't exist.

In talking about anger at God, we discussed the fact that some parents feel it very strongly and others do not. But, after the horrific death of a child, we have to direct our anger somewhere. For many of us, it is to God (he can handle it) or to family and friends or to life in general. We just have to let it out.

God didn't take our child. Death took our child because of original sin. We will get our child back when we are reunited in heaven.



Our son died because of a decision he made to get into a car and drive after he had been drinking, one father said. Did Satan make him do it? Possibly. We will never know. But he died and it wasn't our fault. We were the best parents we could be. We tried so hard. In the end, as parents, we can't protect them from everything.

"I don't blame God; I'm too busy blaming myself, because I failed God. I was given this beautiful gift for so many years and I couldn't protect it. I am so very sorry."

"People everywhere avoid us. I get the feeling that they are tired of our grief. 'Aren't you over it yet, they ask.'"

We had a lively discussion of signs from our children who are very much alive and well and active in our lives right now. Parents talked about receiving signs—unexpectedly or after requesting it—through music, rainbows, dreams, cardinals, dimes, and wedding dresses. **"There are no coincidences."**

These signs are all very real, we agreed, and bring us closer to our beloved children. They are speaking to us every day, as is the Risen Lord. We just need to harden not our hearts and be open to it.

One parent talked about telling Jesus that she really needed to talk with him over coffee some day. When she walked into a coffee shop that had an image of the Divine Mercy on its wall, she knew that this was the time and the place. Unbelievable.

When asked where they have found any additional peace and comfort after the death of their precious children, parents said... in addition to reserving special time each morning when they wake up to say hello to their children—or even go outside to spend dedicated

time in conversation and prayer with their children—that they have had special car license plates or specialized jewelry made. Other parents said that it is grandchildren that make it all worthwhile.

Fr. Jim Rafferty is very special. A retired priest living at St. Peter's, he was asked to celebrate the Saturday Vigil Mass because Fr. Bill was hearing confessions.

It was an absolutely beautiful Mass where Fr. Jim at the beginning welcomed us as grieving parents and explained to the congregation that we had been there all day at a retreat. He asked everyone to hold us in prayer.

During the Mass, each child was remembered by name during the Prayers of the Faithful; the choice of music was deliberate; and Fr. Jim's homily was obviously mindful of us.

In his homily, Fr. Jim talked about the fact that Death is not the end. We are destined for eternal life, he said. Each of us is made for eternal life. It all comes down to what we say in the creed at every Mass...

“I believe in the resurrection of the body and in life everlasting.”

Afterwards, parents had this to say about the retreat...

- *“It was quite healing and comforting.”*
- *“It was a gentle experience for me to connect with God. I feel at peace.”*
- *“It is always good to be around faith-filled people who ‘get it.’”*
- *“Having this retreat was helpful and comforting.”*

And so... as we see the sun setting a tiny bit later each night, mirroring the tiny steps of our grief journeys, yet another Emmaus Ministry Retreat for Grieving Parents in Plymouth, MA ended.

