



Emmaus Ministry Retreat

Saturday, January 13, 2018 at the Capuchin Retreat Center, Garrison, New York

Opening Reflections

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Let us open our reflection by inviting God consciously, and intentionally, into our presence. "Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, enkindle in them the fire of your love, send forth you spirit, and they will be created, and you will renew the face of the Earth."

There is an hour, that I spend about every six weeks, that I truly cherish. I go to Hyde Park, New York and spend an hour with Father Peter Vianney who is my Spiritual Director. Fr. Peter came from Vietnam in the 1960's, has been a priest for more than fifty years and has a Doctorate in Systematic Theology. There is nothing that I cannot say to him. I discuss my spiritual life with him because "you can't give what you don't have." After we finish with our discussion, I go to confession. As I return to my home in Newburgh, I have this astonishing feeling that divinity and humanity have touched each other. I open my remarks with this story because I would like to bring a sense of spiritual direction to my presentation and dialogue. If, during my talk, you have any questions or want to relate something meaningful in your life, please do not be afraid. If we are going to answer the most fundamental questions, Why? Where is my child now? Where can I find hope and peace? Where is God in my life right now? How could God let this happen? Where do I turn now that God has abandoned me? Will I ever see my child again? How can I ensure that any good comes from this adversity? We are Christ-centered, and we must form our conscience and see it through the prism of faith. Faith and reason can take us where science by itself cannot.

For parents, the loss of a child is an incomprehensible tragedy. This tragedy, that has occurred in your life, can be compared to taking a ride on a roller coaster. You get into the car and securely belt yourself in. As the cars move forward, everyone enjoys the exhilaration when they begin to climb up an eighty-foot incline. As you go higher, you begin a sense of foreboding about what's going to happen. As you begin your descent, the sense of weightlessness and the G-forces make you feel that your stomach is coming up into your chest. You hang on with "white knuckles" to the handlebars as you spin and twist through the turns that seem endless. As the ride comes to an end, you find it difficult to exit the car and walk away. Each one of us will have variations, but the absolute loss of power and control and the frustrations that reach to the bottom of our soul are common denominators for all of us.

And then, it gets worse. The friends that you thought you had don't know how to react to you. They try to be helpful, but they often say things that are, at best, insensitive, and even hurtful. Some of the things about which you were very sensitive and passionate are now trivial. Your whole world has changed. You are living in a new and often unfamiliar land where the scenery and terrain are totally different from what you knew before your child died.

I want to share with you some of the experience that I have had with the parents who have lost children. Since 2009, I have been participating in the "end of life" ministry. I go to our Hospice residence facility in Newburgh to visit patients, caregivers and family members. I do this every Friday and then bring Holy Communion to them on Sundays as part of my homebound ministry. In total, as a Deacon, I have vested for more than 300 funerals of which 90 were Hospice patients since my ordination in 2010. It has fundamentally changed my entire perspective on the issue of death and how it affects people. No one can honestly say how they would react, if it happened to them, because it is an issue that goes to the depths of our souls. I have seen, on the one hand, families conduct a two-day, silent prayer vigil, or on the other extreme get into fights with other family members where the police had to be summoned. It is an excruciatingly painful moment that is handled differently by everyone. I hope that I can share with you, in my journey, some things that might bring you comfort.

Before we can answer the question of why it happened, we must look at the most fundamental reason for our existence. In a plan called "salvation history", God intended that man and woman come together and create a human existence for which the soul that God gives it at its conception will someday adore and praise Him for all eternity in heaven. At death, the soul and the body separate. The soul joins the God that created it and waits until the "end of time" when the body, in its glorified state, will be joined with it for all eternity.

We, on the human level, look at life through a time-based, finite order of existence. We believe that a parent should never have to bury his or her own child. It goes against every sense of order that we understand. We need to look at the loss of our loved one, not through human eyes, but through the eyes of the one who created him or her, who always lives in the present and is not encumbered by any sense of order or time. We are told in the Book of Wisdom "the just man, though he die early, shall be at rest. For the age that is honorable comes not with the passing of time, nor can it be measured in terms of years." "Having become perfect in a short while, he reached the fullness of a long career, for his soul was pleasing to the Lord, therefore he sped him out of the midst of wickedness. But the people saw and did not understand, nor did they take this into account."

Everyone who loses someone who is important to them and especially for parents who have lost children, there is always the question of why God would permit tragedy and evil to happen. The God who created the universe, as we described earlier, is by His very nature "free will." His greatest gift to us, in his love for us as his creation is the free will to choose Him, who is all-good, or to choose evil. If we were to draw a circle, we could not put good and evil in the circle at the same time. They cannot exist together in the same place. We must make the choice. If there were no evil, there would only be good, and it would eliminate the possibility of choice and the use of free-will. It is our fervent prayer that we would all have a meaningful life and always choose the good. Could we not ask that our death be as meaningful as our life? If the

death of our children brings us closer to Christ, then our children not only had a meaningful life but also a meaningful death.

In my experience in the “end of life” ministry at Hospice, I have come to look at death as a process which is neither good or evil, but simply a change of natures—the natural to the supernatural. The Hospice nurses will come to me and describe a patient as “actively dying”, and so I have come to see it as an airplane coming into an airport for a landing. The plane is told by the tower to circle the airport and wait for instructions. With each circle, there is a slow descent. Finally, the order to land is given. I believe that the center of my faith is not just the death of Jesus, but his resurrection. The wheels of the airplane touching the tarmac is our signal that we have landed and can now anticipate our movement to the gate. Simply stated, death is not an end, but the beginning of life eternal and the fulfillment of the promise that God made to all His creation. As St. Paul writes, Oh death, where is thy sting, Oh grave, where is thy victory?

The reason why I follow the Hospice family members and caregivers to the Wake, Funeral Mass and the Committal at the gravesite is to show them that death did not die in the Hospice room. Likewise, to remind them that death does not end the relationship with their loved one or your child. There is a continuing relationship that we have through the Eucharist, the Body of Christ, which is composed of the Church Militant on Earth, the Church Penitent in Purgatory and the Church Triumphant in Heaven. It is our fundamental belief in faith that our relationship with our child continues and we will be together again forever.

The story of Emmaus, that we find in the Gospel of St. Matthew, is a perfect metaphor for our own lives. It happened on the Sunday afternoon of the day of Our Lord’s resurrection. Some of the disciples had been called to the tomb earlier that morning and now reported that the body of Our Lord was no longer in the tomb. A recent movie called “Risen” tells the story of a Roman soldier directed by Pontius Pilate to find the body. In his search, he interacts with the apostles and, in the end, becomes a convert to the faith. He had been present at the crucifixion and knew that the human Jesus had died. His journey of faith went from utter cynicism to skepticism and denial to acceptance and joy.

The two apostles who were going to Emmaus were scared and disillusioned, just as you were when you lost your child. In the “fight or flight” response, they decided to leave. They tell us that Emmaus was a town about seven miles from Jerusalem. Emmaus was an escape and a refuge from an existence and reality that these disciples could not explain. It tells us that Jesus began to walk with them. They did not recognize him because they were so caught up in their own emotions. Does that sound familiar? When he asked them what was happening, they berated him for not knowing about the death of Jesus. He did not criticize them but simply told them who he was and explained his purpose as it was outlined in the Scriptures.

If they left Jerusalem in the early afternoon, a seven-mile walk would have taken them three to four hours. So, it is natural that they would want to stop and get something to eat. How did they recognize Jesus? It tells us that they recognized him in the “breaking of the bread”. As his hands took the bread and broke it, as He had done at the Last Supper, they said that “our hearts were burning within us.”

What we can learn from the Emmaus story will strengthen us in this time of pain. First, the disciples were leaving their spiritual home. Unlike the two disciples, he doesn't criticize or berate them or us in our anguish, but walks with us and shows us who he is, that is, if we let him. The breaking of the bread can signify several things. First, that in the depth of our despair, Jesus will be there to nourish us with his Body and Blood, the gift of finest wheat. Second, the fracturing of the bread and the host at Mass signified how Jesus' body relates to the loss of your child. Your life has been fractured. He wants us to see him in the "breaking of the bread." Third, God permits evil and tragedies to happen, so that we will choose him. When we recognize Jesus, we understand the total impact that he can have on our lives. It will fundamentally change our attitudes and perspectives.

In the times of our deepest anguish, we need to turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, as the one advocate who is the most powerful woman in the universe. In Mariology, we study the impact of the woman referred to as the "new Eve." Mary's humility is in direct contract to the pride of Eve. What she shares with Eve is that they were both mothers who lost a son. How great was the depth of her suffering with the death of her son on the cross that was foretold to her by the prophet Simeon when she brought the infant Jesus to the Temple for his Presentation. Simeon told her that a sword of sorrow would pierce her heart. For those who truly understand the Way of the Cross, his suffering and ultimately his death bring us closer to the reality of Jesus in our lives. Do parents like to show pictures of their children? We pray the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary because she wants us to see her son. In her book "Visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary" Sr. Anne Catherine Emmerich, a nun who lives in the nineteenth century, tells the story of Our Blessed Mother when she was living on the island of Patmos with St. John the Evangelist. She told rocks and made stations to commemorate the Ways of the Cross.

In April, last year, I began taking homebound communion to Steve and Kristi Torres who were caring for their son Xavier and could not come to Mass. Xavier was a six-year-old hospice patient who was terminally ill with cancer. I was at their home with the as Kristi held Xavier in her arms and watched him die. There are simply no words on the human level to describe that moment. The Pieta in Rome is the famous status of Mary holding Jesus in her arms. Only the Blessed Mother can really understand.

The Blessed Virgin Mary was official recognized as the Mother of God by the Council of Ephesus in 431 A. D. This most power intercessor has a direct connect to Our Lord because of the humility that she shares with her son who is called the "new Adam." The strength of the relationship bore fruit at the Wedding Feast of Cana. When she realized that the wedding party was running low on wine, she said to her son. "they have no wine." He replied that his "hour" has not come. She immediately went to the servants and said, "do whatever he tells you." In effect, the Mother of God was telling the Son of God that it was important to her and that he should do it. Jesus told us to live the commandments. He lived the fourth commandment by honoring his mother by granting her wish and changing the water into wine. If she has that type of connection to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, is she not someone that we should honor and reverence?

If you are asked this question “what would you want Jesus to say to you at your judgement”? you would probably respond “come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” With those who have a very close relationship to his Mother, he might say “my mother has been telling me great things about you and wanted to meet you as soon as you arrived.”

The story of the Visitation between the Blessed Mother and her cousin Elizabeth is important to our understanding of Mary. It tells us in the Gospel that “she left for the hillsides of Judea in haste.” We have to understand that Hebron, where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived, was about eighty miles from Nazareth, where Mary lived. Mary herself was pregnant with our Blessed Lord. For a woman of her time to make an eighty-mile journey over very difficult terrain and in hostile circumstances tells us how far Mary will go to help us with our grief and loss that she knows so well.

We should consider the Gospel of Mark, versus 43-46. It says “Joseph of Arimathea, a noble counselor, came and went boldly to Pilate, and begged him for the body of Jesus. And Joseph, buying fine linen, and taking him down, wrapped him in the fine linen. We should consider the most bitter sorrow that the soul of Mary suffered when she saw the dead body of her dear Jesus on her knees, covered with blood, all worn with deep wounds. Who could not look at this picture and not be deeply touched at the mourning Mother of God? Those who had attended the crucifixion were wailing and crying. If we reflect on the seven sorrows of Mary, we can come to understand what she suffered in her heart. Her heart became a mirror of the passion of her son, Jesus, and all of the wounds, blows, pain and suffering that he endured. Our Blessed Mother never gave up hope, even when life brought darkness, sorrow and pain. Deep faith and love sustained her-even when she did not fully understand. It gave her strength. She lived with the greatest courage, because he lived the greatest love. Mary embraced what God asked of us- to increase the example of Jesus and Mary in our own lives. The death of her son on the Cross is a spiritual and emotional bond that unites us with Mary. The key to understanding Mary’s courage is to understand her seven sorrows.

In the United States, in certain areas of the South, it is the custom when someone dies, that the hospital staff caring for the person sends a plant or flowers to the funeral home. A woman who was of another Christian faith suffered the loss of her child after an illness, and many floral arrangements came to the funeral home, including one with a statue of Mary from the nurses who had cared for the child. It was on display right across from where the woman sat, and at time she stared at it. Many people came to pay their condolences “how are you doing,” “you need to take care of yourself” and finally someone said, “I know how you feel”. The woman snapped back. “There is only one person who knows how I am feeling, and that is her.” And she pointed to the statue! Mary’s presence was in the room with the grieving mother. Let us turn to the Blessed Mother to help guide us, teach us and inspire us to be compassionate with strength, faith and peace. Let us unite our personal suffering with that of Mary’s own. How do you think you could unite your suffering to those of the Blessed Mother?

Our understanding of the grieving process begins with the recognition that crazy is normal. We can go back to the story of Marth, who twice criticized Our Lord over the death of

her brother Lazarus before she came to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and Savior. Her frustration boiled over with she told him “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She then told him “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day.” There is much of Martha in all of us. The loneliness, tension, anxiety and nervousness that surrounds the loss of a child reaches to the deepest level of our humanity. We must be patient with ourselves and realize that God is being patient with us because he lived our humanity and understands it. We have to get away from the idea that there is a fixed time for mourning. We should not be afraid to ask for help. You should tell your pastor that it is really bothering you. Accept your feelings. It's okay to cry and to be angry with yourself and God. Let it out, hit the pillow or punching bag, scream, chop wood, whatever it takes, but let it out. Thinking that you are going crazy is a very normal reaction. Most grieving people experience this feeling. Some levels of depression are common to those in grief. The emotions of the survivor are often raw. Some people call it “survivor’s guilt.” They don’t understand why it was their child and not them. We need to share our feelings with supportive loved ones as often as we feel the need.

Many people today are going back to the early Church Fathers such as Eusebius, Athanasius, Jerome, Clement of Alexandria and Augustine. It was St. Augustine who gave us the best definition of the Trinity. As the most core element of our faith, he said that the Father is “the one who loves. The Son is the one who is loved. Their love is so powerful that it created a God equal to themselves in God the Holy Spirit. This is the divine level, the supernatural level that is timeless for a God who always lives in the present. We see the Trinity at the human level in the love that man and woman have for each other that produces a human being who is equal to them.

It was his divine will that human beings would be created, and that we would act as co-creators in his plan called salvation history. As the philosopher Teilhard de Chardin tells us, “we are not simply a body with a soul but a soul that is living a human existence. Mother Teresa of Calcutta echoed the same sentiment and it became the core philosophy and spirituality that helped her to dedicate her life to the poorest of the poor in India. Therefore, it is fundamental that we base our relationship with God in the light of the creator and we his servants doing his holy will.

The faith that has brought us here today has given us, for the last two thousand years, the understanding, because we walk by faith and not by sight, that we are all part of something much greater than we have the capability to understand. Within the Catholic faith, there have been many who have developed beautiful spiritualities that we need to investigate in order to help understand God’s will in our lives. There are spiritualities that have developed over the centuries that give us tremendous insight into consolation and compassion.

St. Ignatius of Loyola tells us that we must always recall that we are in the presence of God. You are before the God who loves you and welcomes you, who enlightens you and guides you. He dwells with you and is ever working in you. We should give thanks to God for his many gifts that include what is pleasant and unpleasant. Remember the words of the Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of compassion and of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we

ourselves are encouraged by God. Our hope for you is firm for we know that as you share in the suffering you also share in the encouragement. As St. Ignatius developed his Spiritual Exercises, he tells us that Jesus is not simply a model to be imitated, but rather as the glorified Christ seated at the right hand of the Father. He is always God with us, laboring with us and for us and drawing us to the Father's love.

St. Francis of Assisi taught his monks the spirituality that sees God the Father in everything. If God is the great Creator, and everything in the created world has a little bit of God in it. St. Francis viewed creation as a partnership with the rest of creation. He exhorted everyone to do a careful reading of the Gospel and integrating it into every aspect of one's life. Franciscan spirituality recognizes God in all his aspects, a merciful God, a just God, or a rewarding God and a God of love and goodness. We should lead a life of prayer that is liturgical, personal and communal. We should be instruments of peace. The prayer of St. Francis encapsulates the essence of his spirituality. "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may never seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood, so much as to understand, to be loved so much as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, pardoning that we are pardoned, and in dying that we are born to eternal life."

The Carmelites have a spirituality that gives us a different perspective. Carmelite spirituality speaks of prayer and contemplation as "friendship with God" and ultimately "union with God." It is not just a technique for one of our daily activities, but embracing one's whole life. There is no relationship that is outside our relationship with God. Silence and solitude are necessary prerequisites for prayer and contemplation. Silence refers not only to external noise also to the quelling of one's internal noises. Silence is the necessary condition for listening attentively to the still, small voice of God. Solitude provides the ambience where one may be alone so as to focus more actively on the beloved. Solitude is not separation but a place of privilege to encounter Christ. St. Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun of the sixteenth century, would spend many hours in adoration. St. Teresa would respond "I just sit here and love Him." I share these three spiritualities with you because we have within our faith incredible understandings of how we can increase and develop our relationship with God, even in the face of an overwhelming and inexplicable tragedy.

We often look at life through human eyes because we are conditioned to do it. On our journey of faith, it is more providential and spiritually uplifting to life through the eyes of the one who gave our souls a human existence at the moment of our conception in our mother's womb. As it tells us in Sacred Scripture, "I knit you in your mother's womb before you were born." Every soul created by God is predestined, unless that soul chooses otherwise, to enjoy the Beatific Vision for all eternity. We are people of faith. It is a faith, we are promised, that will last for all eternity.

In the Spanish culture, there is a popular refrain "En la tierra de los ciegos, un tuerto es rey." It means "in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." I am one of the blind. I have

never experienced this horrific loss and the pain that it gives you. In that case, who is really going to teach whom. You are going to teach me far more than I will ever teach you.

Let's take this one step farther by giving you an example from my days in the military. As an Army retiree, I know that there are two kinds of soldiers. The first is a "garrison" soldier who lives at a fort. He enters every morning, he hears them play reveille. He spit-shines his shoes and goes through different types of training. At night, he hears them play "taps" before he goes to bed. He lives a normal life with his wife and children in government housing. The second is the "field" soldier. He leaves the fort and is deployed to all parts of the world to engage the enemy in combat. An Army never won a war when the soldier stays in the fort. When Charley and Diane lost their son Paul, they were the epitome of the garrison soldier. They had a normal life and now they are in the field helping those of us who are blind to see the real truth of their pain and suffering.

Let us close our spiritual investigation by reading the beautiful poem "Footprints in the Sand." "One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene, I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there are two sets of footprints, other times there was one only. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints. So, I said to the Lord, "you promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life, there was only one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I need you most, have you not been there for me? The Lord replied, "the years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you."

Thank you. God Bless You!

