



St. Anthony Shrine & Ministry Center



“Our Children Are Not Gone. They Have Just Gone On Ahead”

Coming home is always good.

Nine years ago in March of 2009, with much fear and trepidation, we launched what is now known as the Emmaus Ministry. We offered a weekend spiritual retreat for 25 grieving parents in the “upper room” of St. Anthony Shrine’s friary. Afterwards, parents who participated said that it did indeed bring much peace, comfort, hope, and love. For many, it was the first time they had felt this since the death of their children.

Saturday, March 10, 2018 we offered a One-Day Retreat, one of many which are now offered not only at the Shrine, but also in many places and dioceses outside of New England. As always, it felt really good to be home. No matter how far we travel in our quest to empower other parents and dioceses in adopting the ministry, the Shrine remains our spiritual home.



We served 22 parents who came from five states, including North Carolina, Virginia, New York, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

We honored 16 children whose age at the time of death ranged from pre-natal to 49 years old. Time since the death ranged from six weeks ago to 49 years ago. Cause of death included miscarriage, illness, overdose, suicide, accident, murder, gas leak, and plane crash.

Members of our retreat team included Fr. Mike Johnson, OFM; Jennifer S, Kathryn and Rachael's mother; Genevieve B, Ashleigh's mother; Barbara M, Melissa's mother; Krista S, AJ's mother; Claire M, David's mother; Beth Rapoza, Paul's sister; and Charley and Diane Monaghan, Paul's parents.



We began with a welcome from Fr. Frank Sevola, OFM, Guardian of St. Anthony Shrine Friary. “We welcome you to our home,” said Fr. Frank, “and the friars who live here have been praying in a special way for you.”

Afterwards, Fr. Mike gave a very powerful reflection that deeply resonated with parents. “You pour everything into your kid,” said Fr. Mike. “The devastation at their loss is profound. We are all here because we hope for a glimpse of life beyond this one,” he said. “And we ask... what is the meaning of suffering?”

“We live in a broken world,” said Fr. Mike, “bad things happen to good people. In the Bible, Job did all that God asked of him, but he had to suffer so much. The question is ‘Why?’ The answer is a mystery,” said Fr. Mike.

“Where is hope?” asked Fr. Mike. “God didn’t take your child,” said Fr. Mike, “Death took your child. God is keeping him/her safe until you are together again.”

Referencing a best-selling book, *The Shack*, Fr. Mike talked about how the Trinity appeared to a grieving father whose precious daughter was murdered. God appeared as an African American woman. “*I am whoever you need me to be,*” said God.

“The true hope of our faith,” said Fr. Mike, “is that death is NOT the end. Your children are not gone. They have gone on ahead.”

“What does heaven look like? We have no idea,” said Fr. Mike. “But the Irish believe that there are ‘thin’ places where we can definitely feel the Divine. Life has changed, but the love we feel for our children still binds us.”

Jennifer S. gave a forceful Parent Witness on her spiritual journey after the death of not one, but two, beautiful daughters. After the death of her first daughter, Kathryn, she questioned everything and had to live with the reactions of those she called, “well-intentioned idiots.”

In their attempt to make her feel better, these people said all the wrongs things. Things like... (Because she adopted four special needs’ children)

“They weren’t really yours anyhow. You knew they were going to die young because of their special needs. Your pain is not really the same as someone who carried a child in the womb...”



“In the end,” said Jennifer, “these two beautiful daughters taught me how to love unconditionally. I know that by being their mother, I am a better person. I love to imagine them together in the fields of heaven, without their wheelchairs for the first time, running and playing joyfully with five other little ones, my miscarriages.”

During Emmaus Ministry retreats, we always have a Saturday Vigil Mass. In his homily, Fr Mike talked about the reading from John and our glimpse of what lies ahead, the joyous banquet.

Throughout the day, Fr. Mike shared many poignant personal moments, about the death of his dear sister in a car accident and how it affected his family and his parents for the rest of their lives.

He also talked about a friend who started out as a Franciscan friar, but ended up falling in love and marrying. His friend and his wife conceived a beautiful daughter, who had many issues, even in utero. After birth, she spent most of her time in and out of hospitals until she died at nine months of age.



Fr. Mike marveled at the resiliency of these parents who turned their tragedy into good by offering “Days of Recollection” for other grieving parents in the area. These broken parents reached out to other parents encouraging them to find God in other people, in little things.

“When we help others, we help ourselves,” said Fr. Mike. “Jesus did this on Holy Thursday when he wiped the feet of others.”

An Emmaus Ministry mantra is *“It is in consoling that we are consoled.”* As grieving parents, most of us agree that we had no control over the death of our children. The good news is... we do have control over how we handle this death and this devastating experience.

With the time that we have left on this earth... if we can use the death of our child for good—and make our kids proud of us—it will all work out in the end. We will have our glorious reunion and all will be well.

We concluded with a beautiful Closing Prayer Service during which we experienced the “laying on of hands” by the friars and the always comforting Sacrament of Anointing by Fr. Mike.”

We extinguished the wicks of the Memorial Candles after being reminded that the candles, while beautiful, are only *symbols* of the everlasting, eternal lives of our precious children. Nothing can ever take their light—and the presence of their light in our lives—away.

Afterwards, parents had this to say....

“It was a beautiful day and gave me a lot of peace. It was great to spend the day in a spiritual setting... I thank the friars for spoiling us with their generosity.”

“It was a time/place for me to connect with spirituality in a different way. I am grateful to have founded this.”

“God’s grace was abundant.”

“You brought my two sons into this room for me today.”

And so, another retreat at home, in Boston, ended.

