

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



**ONE-DAY RETREAT
JULY 21, 2018**

“There is More to Life Than This World-Part II”

We were greeted by Betty’s piping hot coffee and Maureen’s delicious cinnamon rolls as we gathered on a Saturday morning for a One-Day Retreat for Grieving Parents at Sacred heart of Mary Parish (SHM) in Weirton, WV. It was a great beginning to a beautiful day of peace and comfort. The hospitality of the parish felt like a warm, welcoming hug.



With this, our fourth retreat in WV, it was gratifying to see how both the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and the ministry have adapted to changing needs of parents. Originally, it was a totally diocesan sponsored and coordinated weekend program, which worked very well. Now, however, it has evolved into a parish, regionally based ministry, offering One-Day Spiritual Retreats, which have proven to meet the needs of our parents and spiritual leaders even more effectively.

Twenty people gathered in SHM’s Parish Hall, fifteen of whom were grieving parents with others volunteers from this vibrant parish contributing.

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, who lead our Opening Prayer Service and provided spiritual support throughout day; Fr. Tony Thurston, who participated in the Opening Prayer Service and served as Confessor; Maureen Kerr, SHM Office Manager, who also served as our very

efficient On-Site Retreat Coordinator; Betty Fiedorczyk, our Hospitality Coordinator, who makes the world's best mashed potatoes; and ??? as volunteers. St. Joseph the Worker Prayer Shawl Ministry provided beautiful prayer shawls for each participant.

Emmaus Parent Companions included Michelle and Tom McFadden (returners from our original retreat in the diocese in 2013), as well as Charley and Diane Monaghan from MA, two of the original founders of the Emmaus Ministry.

Michelle and Tom served as Parent Witnesses. Dicksie Patterson, an Emmaus Parent Companion from Scottsdale, AZ, provided our Memorial Candles and Comfort Crosses in Loving Memory of her beautiful daughter, Crystal Rezzonico.



We welcomed parents not only from Weirton, but also from Wheeling and Morgantown, WV; as well as Lowell, Steubenville, and St. Clairsville, OH. We honored 10 children who had died.

Age at death ranged from pre-natal to 26 years old. This retreat was unusual in that six out of the 10 children we honored were six years old or younger at the time of death; four were infants. Time since the death ranged from 12 weeks ago to 16 years ago. Cause of death included prematurity, stillbirth, car accident, suicide, overdose, illness, and malpractice.

After a beautiful Opening Prayer Service, during which we were reminded about the significant of Light... the light of Christ reflected in the light of our children, Fr. Dennis gave a continuation of his moving reflection on *"There is More to Life Than This World."*

He began by apologizing on behalf of all of those we have met since the death of our children who have added to our pain by thoughtless, careless, or hurtful words. He may be one of them. They may or may not know what they are doing, but they hurt us, none the less. To us, Fr. Dennis apologized for unknowingly inflicting any additional pain.

The loss of a child is the greatest loss anyone can experience, said Fr. Dennis. 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?"*



“Why were we all created?” asked Fr. Dennis. *“To get to heaven... to go home... to be in love... to see look at love and see it look back at us... to gaze into the eyes of Love itself. That is heaven. This is the real beatific vision,”* he said.

Our first reaction to the death of a child may be anger, he said, shaking our fists at God, demanding... Why did this happen? How could this happen?



“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.

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.

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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.

Your child will seek you out in heaven, said Fr. Dennis. He/she will call out to you, *“Mom! Dad! I’m here!! Here I am! I’ve been here all the time!”* And you will run to each other, hug each other and talk and laugh and feel joy once again and for all eternity.

“How did an all-loving God let this happen, we ask?” said Fr. Dennis. “Our Lord has a ‘Perfect Will’ and a ‘Permissive Will,’” he said. Perfect Will is the will that God had when he originally created us in the Garden of Eden. Pain, suffering, and death were not part of the plan. Because of original sin—and the fact that we all have free will—we are now living under God’s “Permissive Will.” Disorder has entered the world. God permits us to use the free will that he has given us.

Therefore, by the very nature of our free will, he permits suffering to happen. He doesn’t want it, but he permits it because our free will wants it to happen.



God understands why we are angry with him, said Fr. Dennis. And it is ok. No matter what, he walks with us, he cries with us, and he wants to help us use this tragedy for good... to turn tragedy into triumph.

As grieving parents, we worry particularly 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. We need to be ready.

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 finished by encouraging us to spend time in *real prayer*... to go to a sacred space, at home, or in nature to focus deeply on... *How do I really feel right now? What is weighing on my chest?* Be honest, he said. Share what you are really feeling with God. Wait for his response. This is where real prayer begins, he said. Maybe this is the beginning of the healing that so many of us seek.

To see the video of Fr. Dennis’s Reflection, go to this [link](#).

Michelle and Tom McFadden spoke from the heart, each giving a very moving Parent Witness highlighting where they currently are in their spiritual journeys. After experiencing the death of their beautiful son, David, because of preventable medical malpractice, they talked about their tremendous struggles with physical, mental, emotional, and legal traumas after the death of their son—and of their struggles with forgiveness. Today, however, both of them find hope as they see signs from their son almost every day.

“It doesn’t get easier,” said Michelle, *“but I have learned to accept it. I look for the little things...the little things that remind me that David is still here and the little things that bring me happiness,”* she said.

“I talk to him every day,” said Tom. *“Last year when I wasn’t feeling quite right, I heard him in my mind tell me over and over again to go the ER. I went and found out that I was in immediate need of open heart surgery. David is still definitely with us,”* he said.

“Why did this happen to our beautiful, healthy, athletic son?” asked the McFaddons, *“There is no answer on this earth. We will find out someday.”*

After a much-needed break, we turned to focus on the spiritual journeys of the parents who had gathered on this particular day in Weirton, WV.

As the stories of our parents unfolded, it became extremely difficult as we struggled to consider... *Why do children die at all? Why does a perfectly healthy baby one minute in utero die the next minute at birth? Why does a beautiful, perfectly healthy and happy baby die of SIDS at three months old? Why do our precious, almost full-term babies born prematurely not survive? Why do three-year-olds drown? Why do six-year olds have incurable diseases? Why do twenty-something's, who have so much potential to change the world die because of random circumstances?*

These are life's hardest questions. There are no real answers. There is only faith. Faith that someday we will know and have all of the answers. Faith that our children are not dead. Faith (not hope) that all of our children are alive and well and truly with us every day. They are all alive and well and truly with us every day. We reach out to them in our grief. We ask them to give us peace and comfort knowing that they are ok. We beg for their intercession in bringing us all together again one day.

We all have the pinprick of light that drew us to this retreat. In this light, we reach out to God and to his Blessed Mother to please be with us on our journey of faith. Above all, we ask them to give us the strength, courage, and desire to not only go on, but to know how to have some good come out of this horrific situation.

After a moving Closing Prayer Service, another Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat in WV ended.

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

- *"This retreat was especially helpful—an extremely moving experience both spiritually and emotionally."*
- *"It has been some time since I have opened up about my son's death. I would say it exceeded my expectations."*
- *"It was very helpful just to have someone new to talk things over with and to hear new perspectives."*

