



RETREAT HIGHLIGHTS

August 25, 2018



“There Goes My Life...”

It was a beautiful summer day on August 25, 2018 when 24 grieving parents and a large retreat team gathered at St. Edward the Confessor Church to focus on our spiritual journeys after the death of our children. The Diocese of Richmond, in conjunction with the St. Edward-Church of the Epiphany Collaborative, offered this moving Emmaus Ministry One-Day Retreat.

We welcomed 24 parents, 18 women and six men. In addition to VA, parents came from WV and MD. We honored 20 children, 18 sons and two daughters. Age at death ranged from 3 days to 53 years old. Time since the death ranged from 4 weeks to 30 years ago.

The retreat was planned, coordinated, and expertly led by Laurie Weeda and Anita McCabe. Other members of the retreat team included Fr. Don Lemay, Pastor of St. Edward the Confessor Church; Mike School, Diocese of Richmond; Rhoda Bevc, Diocese of Richmond; Paul Amrhein, St. Bridget Church; Marta Rollins; Pat Plonski, Sherri Gravins, Michelle Parker, Kathleen Wood, Kathy Wittig, Imelda Gutierrez, Kaylie Gutierrez, Vanessa Gutierrez, Julia Gutierrez, and Randy Weeda; Charley and Diane Monaghan; Beth Rapoza; Camille Archie; Diocese of Richmond; and the Prayer Shawl Ministries of St. Edward the Confessor and the Church of the Epiphany, as well as many other “behind the scenes” volunteers



Mike School welcomed us and gave special thanks for the gift and opportunity to gather together as community. He told us that the Bishop of the Diocese of Richmond was holding us in prayer.

Our host, Fr. Don Lemay, also welcomed us, encouraging us to experience a day of encounter. He said that the parish was praying for us and that Prayer Shawl Ministry members every

Wednesday at Mass pray for all who are using their prayer shawls.

During a beautiful Opening Prayer Service we lit Memorial Candles in honor of our children. The candles were donated in loving memory of Michael Anderson and Arnett Rollins by their devoted mother, Marta.

Fr. Don gave a meaningful reflection full of compassion, hope, and love. Because of all of the prayers, he said, we truly are on holy ground here.

I can never know your pain, said Fr. Don, because I am not a parent. But I can try to relate. The song, [*“There Goes My Life”*](#) by Kenny Chesney gives me some idea. It tells the story of a young man whose girlfriend became pregnant when they were in high school. In an instant he saw all of his hopes and dreams for his future evaporate, and he sings, “...*There goes my life.*”

As he watches his little girl grow up, he realizes it was all worth it. When she leaves for college, he again sings, “*There goes my life.*” But this time it has a completely different meaning.

There is physicality to grief, said Fr. Don. Their body is gone and your body feels it physically. Grief is primitive, he said. Eventually, we will all rise from the dead and it will be possible to physically hold our children again. Parents are co-creators of their children; we know that their lives never end. The soul is immortal; it never goes out of existence. Your children are present here, said Fr. Don, but in a different way.

Fr. Don urged us to use the day for hearing and healing. Let the day bring you to Hope, he said. He quoted a short poem by George Parsons Lathrop about a child who died of SIDS...

A Child's Wish Granted

Do you remember, my sweet, absent son,
How in the soft June days forever done
You loved the heavens so warm and clear and
high;

And when I lifted you, soft came your cry,
'Put me 'way up—'way, 'way up in blue sky'?
I laughed and said I could not; set you down,

Your gray eyes wonder-filled beneath that crown
Of bright hair gladdening me as you raced by.

Another Father now, more strong than I,
Has borne you voiceless to your dear blue sky.



Fr. Don asked us to focus on the Holy Trinity icon he showed us. This very popular, striking icon depicts the interaction of members of the Trinity, with the hand of the Holy Spirit pointing to what seems to be an empty chair. “*You belong here,*” the Spirit is saying, said Fr. Don. You lost your child, but your child has found his/her place at the table of the Lord. Join us.

According to John 14:1-3, we are all God’s children now. *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You trust in God, trust also in me.*

In my Father's house there are many places to live in; otherwise I would have told you. I am going now to prepare a place for you,

And after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you to myself, so that you may be with me where I am.

When we die, said Fr. Don, we will eventually reach the fullness of human growth with the full ability to love God. Purgatory is where we go to get healed, where God goes to increase our capacity to love. Even those of us who died as babies or young children will reach the fullness of human growth, he said.

In terms of children who died by suicide or drug overdose, they will eventually be safely back into the Communion of Saints. God will make it all better, he said.



In conclusion, Fr. Don said that God did not create death. He never intended it to happen. It isn’t true that God never gives us more that we can handle. The world gives us more than we can handle, but God helps us through it. He helps us move forward, not move on.

Elizabeth G. and John M. gave moving parent witnesses. After my son died, said John, I had a feeling of terror. I needed to find out what heaven is like, from a Catholic perspective. When my son died, said Elizabeth, he became not an angel, but my slave. He has much work to do in heaven. Elizabeth also talked about visiting Michelangelo’s “*Pieta*” in Rome—and how Mary is with us as we walk this journey.

Marta R. shared a beautiful poem written for her for Mother’s Day a few years ago. What a wonderful tribute of a son to his mother!

Throughout the day, we heard comments like

“Miracle do happen; you may just not get the answers you want.”

“If God could send his only son to die, we, too, can bring good from the death of our children.”

“My daughter’s death was a random event, but God did bring some good out of it.”

“God never promised a life without pain, but he did promise to walk with us.”

Karen S. shared [“Womb of God,”](#) a poignant reflection she wrote based on her reading of Psalm 88. Click on the link for the full reflection. Here is an excerpt:

Today, as I remembered my experience of darkness in that tunnel, what came to me was that, what I then experienced as a tunnel surrounding me, was really the womb of God. At the time, I didn't realize it but God, as Mother, was holding me in Her womb. I was being held by Her, within Her very being. That light at the end of the tunnel was the birth canal through which God would birth me to new life. In what I perceived as God's very absence, God could not have been more present to me.

After a comforting Mass and moving Closing Prayer Service during which we extinguished the wick of our children’s candles (never the light), Fr. Don sent us forth with a beautiful, inspirational blessing:

FR. DON’S FINAL BLESSING

Gracious God, send us back to the world with your eyes, rather than ours. Help us to see not only the sad, but the good; not just the worst, but the best. Help us to see around us the seeds of your kingdom both here and to come.

Go forth in faith; for there is God in the light on the waters, in the song of the birds, and in the midst of the lives that have touched ours and the memories we cherish.

May we leave our time together with faith in our hearts, praise on our lips and thanks for love in our hearts always through Christ Our Lord and Savior.

May the blessing God be upon you, your homes, and all we love...

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen.

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

- *I am thankful for the format of the retreat and the understanding that everyone grieves differently and is at their own place in the process, and that each individual may choose how to participate differently.*
- *I am very happy to have become a part of this healing ministry.*
- *I feel I have gained love and comfort from strangers. I feel I have been surrounded by others who also feel the heartbreak and emptiness that I also feel.*
- *Just being in a space with people who know your grief is healing. The discussions especially the Emmaus walk are wonderful.*
- *The letter writing was very therapeutic*

And so, another Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat ends. Our next Diocese of Richmond Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat will be offered on October 6, 2018 at St. Bede's Church in Williamsburg.

