



**ONE-DAY RETREAT
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2018
ST BEDE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

We Grieve, But Not Without Hope

It was a beautiful summer-like day on Saturday, October 6, 2018 when parents arrived at Kaplan Hall, the beautiful new Parish Center of St. Bede's Catholic Church in Williamsburg, VA. As parishioners and members of the parish's current bereavement support group, many already knew each other and felt right at home.



We welcomed 12 parents: nine mothers and three fathers. We honored 11 children: eight sons and three daughters. One mother lost three children. Age at the time of death ranged from three years to 60 years old. Time since the death ranged from 21 months ago to 54 years ago. Cause of death included illness (7); accident (2); suicide (1); and unknown (1).

Members of the retreat team included Deacon Francis Roettinger and Fr. Peter Naaah from St. Bede's; volunteers from St. Bede's Legion of Mary, Young at Heart, and Knights of Columbus; Beth and Andy Culhane; Joan and Joe Connors; Beth Rapoza; and Rhoda Bevc, Andrew Waring, and Michael School from the Diocese of Richmond.

Parents were warmly welcomed by St. Bede's Legion of Mary volunteers, Deacon Francis Roettinger, and Andrew Waring of the Diocese of Richmond, which subsidized this retreat. During a beautiful Opening Prayer Service, we were reminded about the significance of "Light" in our Catholic faith and in our Catholic rituals. *"Only light can cast out the darkness,"* said C.S. Lewis. Lighting our child's candle rekindled a closeness many of us had not felt in quite some time.

Deacon Francis' reflection was heartfelt and moving. He talked about Job and how the loss of a child is the world's greatest evil and the deepest of all pains. He spoke fondly of

a little girl he knew who was born with a serious illness and not expected to live more than a few months. She lived several years. While her parents were eternally grateful for the years she was alive, they still questioned “Why?” when she died.

There is no answer to the question as to why, said Deacon Francis. For answers, we need to move to our faith. Isaiah tells us that one day no infant who live only a few days; 100 years will be seen as youthful; and no-one will beget children for destruction.

The love of God will always conquer evil, said Deacon Francis. Evil will always be one inch shorter than the love of God for us. While we must go through the Crucifixion, the result is the Resurrection. The Resurrection guarantees us that our children are alive and well and that we will hold them again. One day we will experience the ultimate joy.



We Catholics don’t “clean up” the crucifix, he said. We include the corpus on the crucifix to remind us of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ and of God, the Father. Our entire religion is based on the death of a child. Jesus is the Son of God and the son of Mary. Both God the Father and Mary, our mother, know our pain and grieve with us. A beautiful image of Mary is the “Mother of Sorrows” as depicted in the famous *Pieta* sculpture by Michelangelo.

St. Paul says that we grieve, but not without hope. Sometimes the only prayer we can say when we are near despair is “*Lord, be my strength today.*”

Deacon Francis concluded his reflection by urging us to have a conversation with the Lord to ask our burning questions. But remember, he said, conversations are always two-way. You would not meet a friend, talk all about yourself and ask for a lot of favors, then walk away without ever listening to what your friend had to say.

Likewise, said Deacon Francis, the key to prayer is listening...listening to what the Lord has to say, listening to God speaking to us. You may not literally hear his voice, said Deacon Francis, but you will surely see it when something good happens to you, when someone shows you love and compassion, when you feel a slight sliver of hope. But you have to listen and be open to it.

We had the opportunity throughout the rest of the day to interact with each other one-on-one, in small groups of mothers and fathers, and in a larger group all together. As we met, wherever we met... looking back over it... the presence of the Holy Spirit and of our children was palpable. There was a sense of peace and comfort—and a feeling that we were not alone.



However, the comfort of being in a safe place surrounded by other grieving parents who truly “get it” did not take away the fact that the searing pain of losing a child is all true real.

Particularly interesting were these comments made by parents at various times throughout the day...

“If we are angry with God and walk away from him, we are really saying that we are God and we know best. If we say to God, ‘You should have done this... or that...,’ we are saying that we know better than God.”

“My child’s death literally blew a hole in our family. All of our surviving children are suffering in different ways.”

“People used to wear black when they were in mourning. To do this for a year would be so comforting because the assumption is everyone you see or meet would know and understand your pain. They would be kind to you.”

“St. Faustina, in her Conversation of the Merciful God with a Despairing Soul, offers an interesting perspective on where sinners go after they die. ‘God says...the worst sinner has the biggest claim to my mercy. I will call out to the world’s worst sinner no fewer than three times because no one is beyond my mercy. I will say... Come to me. The only sinner who will go to hell is the one who freely and definitely chooses hell.’”

“Sometimes our faith is only a tiny pinprick of light, but it is there. We need to nourish it and cultivate it for it to grow. It will not grow on its own. It asks for, and requires, participation from us.”

“We need to be gentle with ourselves.”

One parent cited a 2008 National Institute of Health study of 500 families who experienced the loss of a child. Compared to the control group, grieving parents



experienced a significantly higher rate of divorce, depression, and health issues, including heart disease and cancer.



Several parents talked about the difficulty of forgiveness and how this can be the greatest challenge when dealing with the death of your child... forgiving those who may have been involved or in some way caused the death of your precious child. While it is the supreme sacrifice for many, forgiveness can be “the greatest revenge” because of how it can release you from the control of others.

Several of the mothers at this retreat shared the fact that they have been so concerned with ministering to others that they, themselves, have not been ministered to. Spiritual nourishment is critical, they agreed. When we seek the nourishment of the Eucharist to get us through, we receive much in return and it brings us closer to our children.

The retreat ended with parents agreeing that it did bring a large measure of peace and hope to many. We concluded by singing the beautiful, “Go in Peace” by Sarah Hart.

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

“I feel it is important to share with others who have had the same experiences and learn from each other and listen to each other. My goal was to grow in spiritual strength.”

“I am happy to walk the journey with others. It was very helpful.”

“Sharing with others help me to see and seek.”

“I liked the opportunity for the discussion to flow where it needed to go.”

“Gifts of understanding were given to me through the interactions with others.”

