



**One-Day Spiritual Retreat
St. Thomas of Canterbury-St. Joseph Parishes
Cornwall on Hudson
May 18, 2019**

God Does Not Delight in Death

Two beautiful little boys, ages three and eight years old, die because they have a very rare illness... a recent Air Force Academy graduate takes his own life for no apparent reason... a vibrant young mother of three is senselessly murdered.



Called by the Holy Spirit, their devastated parents, and those of 14 other children, gathered at St. Thomas of Canterbury parish in Cornwall on Hudson on Saturday, May 18. They were there to participate in a One-Day Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents spiritual retreat offered by the St. Thomas-St. Joseph Parishes and the Archdiocese of New York.

The age of the children who had died ranged from three years old to 66 years old. Time since their death ranged from only four weeks ago to more than 20 years ago. Cause of death included illness, accident, suicide, overdose, and murder.

But it didn't really matter how old the child or how he or she died, the strong bond that the parents felt with each other was almost instantaneous.

Together, the parents grappled with questions like *What is the difference between moving on and moving forward? Where was God the night my son died? Where is God now? How do I find any peace and comfort, let alone joy?*

The support of the St. Thomas-St. Joseph community was unprecedented. Fr. Rees Doughty was our host and confessor. Deacon Joe Lieby was truly an inspirational spiritual leader throughout the day, together with his wife, Regina, who helped orchestrate the entire retreat at St. Thomas. Anne Marie O'Connor, Director of Religious Ed, expertly coordinated every detail of the logistics of the day. Members of the Youth Ministry Confirmation Class sat in vigil all day long with the Memorial Candles. Knights of Columbus, Council #7460, donated all of the food. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and St. Thomas-St. Joseph Prayer Shawl Ministries provided beautiful prayer shawls. Agata Lisok-Serafin donated the memorial candles in loving memory of her son, Julian. Elizabeth Hernandez donated comfort crosses in loving memory of her son, Jose David. Patricia Adams helped offset the cost of the prayer shawls in loving memory of her son, Frank Mattoni. The entire day was truly a team effort.

Members of the retreat team also included Dr. Kathy Wither, D.Min, Director of the Archdiocese of New York Family Life Office and Sue DiSisto, who expertly coordinates all Emmaus Ministry programs for the Archdiocese.

After a very moving Opening Prayer Service, Deacon Joe shared a reflection he had prepared on the spirituality of the grieving process, referencing many Scripture readings. Why do bad things happen to good people, he asked. Is God punishing us? Is the death of our children part of some sadistic grand plan? Did our children die because we sinned? Not at all, said Deacon Joe. Death is not part of God's plan. Evil happens because we live in a broken world. Siting Wisdom (Chapter 1), he said, *God does not delight in death. Nor does He rejoice in the destruction of the living.*

But why is this world so broken, he asked. According to Paul's letter to the Romans (Chapter 5), *Just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned. However, for just as through the disobedience of one person, the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of One, the many will be made righteous.*



This situation could cause us to despair, said Deacon Joe, if we believed we were all alone in our suffering. The central teaching of our Catholic faith, he said, is that we are not alone. We don't have to cope with suffering by ourselves. God's love for us is more powerful than the all of the forces of evil unleashed in this world.

When God says, "I love you," He means it, said Deacon Joe. We are His children. It is not a passive love; it is a very personal love. We see in Psalm 139:

Lord, you have probed me, you know me:
you know when I sit and stand;
You understand my thoughts from afar.
You sift through my travels and my rest;
With all my ways you are familiar.
Even before a word is on my tongue,

Lord, you know it all.
Behind and before you encircle me
and rest your hand upon me...

You formed my inmost being;
you knit me in my mother's womb.
I praise you, because I am wonderfully made;
Wonderful are your works!

Then Deacon Joe cited Psalm 100:

Know that the Lord is God,
He made us, we belong to Him,
We are His people, the sheep of His flock...

His mercy endures forever,
His faithfulness lasts through every generation.

Just as we would never stop loving our children when they misbehave, God continues to love us, no matter what, said Deacon Joe. God showed His love for us when He redeemed our fallen world. St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans (Chapter 5), wrote, *God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through Him from the wrath.*



And in his first letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 15), Paul comforts us by writing, *Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? ...Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

This story does have a happy ending, said Deacon Joe. Death does not separate us from those we love. We are all connected. We believe, as we say in the Apostle's Creed, in the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and live everlasting.

The book of Revelation (Chapter 21) tells us that one day *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. And He who sat upon the throne said, "Behold I make all things new."*

Deacon Joe concluded with a beautiful blessing for grieving parents:

Compassionate God,
soothe the hearts of the parents gathered here
and grant that through the prayers of Mary,
who grieved by the cross of her Son,
you may enlighten their faith,
give hope to their hearts,
and peace to their lives.

Lord, grant mercy to all parents gathered here
and comfort them with the hope
that one day we will all live with you,
with your Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit,
forever and ever. Amen.

After Deacon Joe's reflection, many parents felt moved to share their reactions and insights. We were brought here today, one parent said, for fellowship for the journey. We need each other. We need other grieving parents who truly understand our pain. I lost my daughter only a few weeks ago, but I am so glad that I came, she said.

In thinking about where God is in our lives right now, another parent said that she was drawn to the book, "*The Shack*," which is about a father's developing relationship with God, from rage to comfort, after the brutal murder of his beautiful young daughter. Read the book, she said. It is much better than the movie.

Another parent referenced another popular book, Kahil Gibran's "The Prophet," in which Gibran states,

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you, but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might
that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

I find it very therapeutic to write, said one father whose daughter died only a few months ago. Writing poetry comforts me, he said. Then he shared a beautiful poem he wrote about his relationship with his daughter.

Another parent agreed that journaling is extremely helpful in her spiritual journey after the loss of her child. Every day, she said, I write in my Gratitude Journal. I list three things that I am thankful for. It is a positive way to get through the day, she said.

After a delicious lunch, we heard from two Parent Witnesses, who have been to previous Emmaus retreats and offered to share where they are in their spiritual journeys. At this retreat Ellen and Michael

Walker gave powerful witness to their faith and belief in the eternal life of their precious son, Michael, who died in 2011 at 29 years old.

There is a huge difference between ‘moving on’ and ‘moving forward,’ said Ellen Walker. We will never move on after the death of our son. We will never get over it. We will never forget. But we can move forward, she said. The support of total strangers in my time of need sustained me, she said. We didn’t walk alone.



Church was the only place that I found any peace, said Michael Walker. During my son’s funeral Mass, I felt drawn to the Holy Spirit. I knew then that there is a tomorrow. Life doesn’t end when a child dies. Open your broken heart to the Holy Spirit, he said. Let Him guide you. I feel blessed. We are all here for a reason, he said. The Holy Spirit is here and working in all of us.

Throughout the day, parents met in large and small groups of mothers and fathers. They walked together in pairs. And they had a lot of time alone, if they chose, to focus on where God is in their lives right now—and where their precious children are.

Over and over again, parents were reminded of the very comforting and rich teachings of the Catholic Church on life after death... life has changed, not ended; our children are very much alive and well and at work in our lives every day; we will see our children again; our children are eternal beings who live on; we have been given the promise of eternal life through the death of our Risen Lord.

Because, as grieving parents, we need to hear these truths over and over again, we welcome parents back to retreats many times over.

The pinnacle of every retreat is the Mass, for it is here that we remember the Crucifixion and celebrate the Resurrection. At our beautiful Saturday Vigil Mass, celebrated by Fr. Robert Phelps, we joined parishioners and were reminded of the “joy of the empty tomb.” Otherwise, according to St. Paul, we have nothing. After the resurrection, said Fr. Robert, the apostles lit up the world with the burning fervor of their faith. Their red-hot fire of love is still burning, he said.

After Communion, Vincent Mateo, Director of Music Ministry, sang a special rendition of “*I Can Only Imagine*” by Mercy Me, a beautiful song contemplating what heaven will be like. It was wonderful gift to all at the Mass. After the Mass, Fr Robert thanked us for enriching the entire community by our presence.

The retreat ended with the Closing Prayer Service in the church. Initially, many people think that an entire day focused on the death of children will be very heavy and very dark. In reality, at Emmaus Ministry retreats, the opposite occurs. The day is one of faith, hope, and trust. It is very uplifting. We leave each other reluctantly amid lots of hugs, buoyed by the faith and hope that has been renewed and, in many cases, restored. Our children live. They are at work in our lives. We will see them again.

After the retreat, parents had this to say:

- *(It was) very spiritual and healing*
- *This was my third retreat and each time I find more peace.*

- *It restored my faith*
- *(I feel the) rejuvenation of my faith.*

The Archdiocese of New York is committed to offering several Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parent retreats at various locations throughout the year. If your parish is interested in finding out more information about hosting or adopting this very powerful ministry, please call Sue DiSisto at 646-794-3191.

For information on participating in or adopting Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parent retreats in other parts of the country, see www.emfgp.org or call Diane Monaghan at 617-542-8057.

