



Archdiocese of Washington



EMMAUS MINISTRY FOR GRIEVING PARENTS

One-Day Retreat

Saturday, March 14, 2020

HIGHLIGHTS

Faith Makes Things Possible, Not Easy

On an ordinary Thursday night in mid-March, the world seemed poised for the beginning of spring and the promise of longer, brighter days ahead. But then everything changed. Schools everywhere began closing their doors; sport seasons were truncated; gatherings above 250 people were banned; and, worst of all, Catholic Masses for cancelled for the foreseeable future.

In the middle of all the chaos, 22 grieving parents came together at St. Joseph's Parish Center in Beltsville, MD for a spiritual retreat. It felt like the quiet, soothing eye of the storm.



Ministering to families that have been shattered and parents whose precious children have died can be daunting. However, the Archdiocese of Washington has introduced a powerful new ministry serving the spiritual needs of parents whose children of any age have died by any cause, no matter how long ago: The Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents. On March 14, these parents came together at St. Joseph's for the Archdiocese's first spiritual retreat.

More than 30 parents originally registered for the retreat. They came from Waldorf, Silver Spring, Takoma Park, North Potomac, Olney, College Park, California, Upper Marlboro, Ft. Washington, Clinton, LaPlata, Rockville, and Halethorpe, MD, in addition to Alexandria, Fairfax, and Arlington, VA.

Because of the coronavirus situation, 22 parents were able to attend. They honored 22 children: 13 sons and nine daughters. Age at the time death ranged from stillbirth to 57 years old. Time since the death ranged from only one week ago to 34 years ago. Cause of death included illness (13); suicide (5); accident (2); stillbirth (2).

Members of the retreat team included...

- Fr. Andrew Wakefield, St. Joseph Parish Pastor and Host
- Br. David Schlatter, OFM, Spiritual Leader
- Carla Ferrando-Bowling, Director, Archdiocese of Washington, Office for Family Life
- Sally Daniel, Associate Director, Archdiocese of Washington, Office for Family Life

- Maria Warner, Nicholas' Mother
- Sandra Coles-Bell, Corinne's Mother
- Janet and Jerry Scanlan, Jake's Parents
- Genevieve Baudin, Ashleigh's Mother
- Charley and Diane Monaghan, Paul's Parents
- Kim and Peter Williamson

Before the retreat, parents said they were coming because they wanted to hear from other parents how they have dealt with reconciling their Catholic faith with the death of their child. They also said they were coming for grace, healing, strength, hope, understanding—and the reassurance and comfort of focusing on the afterlife from a Catholic perspective.

Fr. Andrew Wakefield, pastor of St. Joseph's, welcomed us to his parish center. This is holy ground, he said, because you have made it so. Today is special, he said, because you have the opportunity to know our Risen Lord even more deeply...and you will better know his peace.



The retreat began with a moving Opening Prayer Service during which we lit beautiful candles carrying pictures of our children. We were reminded of the power of light—and how it is a symbol of the Lord's Sacred Presence among us—and that of our children.

Br. David then gave a reflection that spoke to the hearts of the parents. He began by talking about our faith journeys. Journeys always involve movement, he said. We know what the Church says about death and loss. Our creed teaches us that this life is not the end. We have been given the gift of everlasting life.

While we hold this to be true, we don't always feel it, he said. Sometimes our faith is not only shaky, it quakes. Each of us is at a different place. Faith is a journey, not a process.

Br. David read the Gospel of Luke and the Road to Emmaus ([Luke 24: 13-35](#)). The disciples were devastated when they started their journey. All of their hopes and dreams for a Messiah were dashed. They were robbed of promise. But then Jesus, the source of all light, joined them in their darkness. He listened to them in their pain.

In working with bereaved parents for 40 years, I have learned a lot, said Br. David. I have never been a father, but I have listened to so many of them. They have shared with me that...

We need to remember the entirety of our children's lives, not just their passing. We need to remember their living... not just their dying. They are still with us. And that sometimes remembering brings a smile, not always tears and heartache.

You never stop being a mother or a father... you are a mother or father FOREVER. Nothing will ever change that. Nothing will ever take that away. Nothing.

The bottomless pit of the could have... should have... the what ifs... the self-recriminations of not being a good parent is awful. But somehow, we learned not to linger too long in self-blame.

Just because God is silent does not mean that God is absent and does not hear my prayers and my questions. Sometimes God just listens and holds us.

It is okay to question God... to struggle with the unanswered questions and the search for answers. You've shared with me how hard it is to live with the reality that some answers have yet to come, and maybe will *not* come in this life.

You've shared with me that you can be angry with God and still love God. God's arms are larger than your anger.



You've warned me to not rush in and try to take your grief away from you... it might be all you have right now. And that you'd rather feel the pain that comes with remembering than be numb and feel nothing.

Concluding his beautiful reflection, Br. David said that he often wonders why people quoting from Luke and the Road to Emmaus gospel often stop before the last lines: "*While they were still speaking about this, he stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'*"

On your journey, as it continues, may you be blessed, said Br. David. "May the peace of Christ be with you."

At this point parents who wished to do so shared their insights on the spirituality of their grief journey.

Each of us has this horrific cross to bear, said one parent. We all need a Simon of Cyrene to help us. Today, all of you are *my* Simon, he said.

If God had told me when my daughter was born that I would have her for only 27 years, said one mother (and we all agreed), there is no doubt in my mind that I would have said yes to this pain and agony in exchange for all of the joy she brought into my life and the lives of so many others.

Faith makes things possible, not easy, quoted a father. What holds us together is our faith. Christians are not exempt from pain. The more I talk about my faith, the better I feel about it and the more it is pulling me through

Only when you give up the right to understand can you find true peace, said this father.

Developing faith and trust were themes that parents talked about at length throughout the day.

One of our parents who had been to a previous retreat served as a Parent Witness, sharing where she is right now in her spiritual journey after the loss of her son.

I was always a devout Catholic, she said, but all of that stopped when I got that knock on my door. I stopped praying. I stopped going to church. Everything related to my faith unraveled.

When I couldn't pray to God, I prayed to Mary. I still struggle with praying to God, and I ask Mary to be my intercessor. Everything is a work in progress.

Eventually, I began to realize that all of my prayers for my son were answered, she said. My son is now serving a greater purpose in heaven than he could have ever served here on earth. Our time here on earth is short compared to eternity. He is helping everyone in the family get to heaven.

At Mass we are reunited with all of our deceased loved ones, she said. So, I have lots of Masses said for my son. I've even had one celebrated at the beach, one of my son's favorite places. I can hear my son at Mass saying, "You can do this, Mom!"

Throughout the day parents had time to walk together one-on-one, meet together in small groups of mothers and fathers, and gather together as a larger group. Or—they could do nothing at all except focus on their own personal spiritual journeys. Nothing was required; all sessions and interactions were optional.

After the small group sessions, parents offered these insights:

- One of our greatest struggles is “Do not be afraid; just have trust.” We need to trust that our children are ok
- When we question whether or not we did everything we could to parent our children, we need to remember that we did the best that we could with the information that we had at the time.
- Prayer is not like a vending machine where we pray and God supplies us with what we want.
- The devil would love nothing more than our souls, which is why he is always sowing seeds of doubt in our minds.
- As grieving parents, we need to minister to each other and to walk with each other in faith, just as members of the Early Church.
- Our lives are like tapestries. We only see the underside and do not understand, but God sees the big picture and knows. This mother shared a beautiful poem, [“The Weaver.”](#)

Normally, the retreat ends with the Saturday Vigil Mass and dinner, but, sadly, this was not possible because of the corona virus situation. We concluded with a touching Closing Prayer Service during which we were reminded again of Christ, the Light of the World and we celebrated the light of our children.

As we sang, “Go in Peace,” we remembered Fr. Andrew’s and Br. David’s wish for us at the beginning of the day. It definitely was a day not only of peace, but also one of comfort, hope, and love.

After the retreat parents had this to say...

- *The retreat provided a good balance of talks and reflection time, and not feeling pressured to share.*
- *The fellowship is incredible! Catholic parishes need more of this retreat to support grieving families*
- *Thanks for giving us permission to cry.*
- *As a grieving parent, any ceremony that brings attention to my child brings joy to my heart. Thank you!*
- *I pray and hope the Archdiocese will see this as a much-needed ministry and will continue to support it. Everyone here basically said the same thing that they’re looking for the Catholic perspective in how to manage this loss. So, it’s definitely needed and worthwhile!*
- *The Archdiocese of Washington should make this a regular offering, at least once a year, perhaps twice.*



The Archdiocese of Washington is currently discerning how best to serve the spiritual needs of its grieving parents whose children of any age have died by any cause, no matter how long ago. For more information on upcoming programs, please call Carla Ferrando-Bowling at 301-853-4499.