

**DIOCESE OF RICHMOND  
OUR LADY OF MOUNT CARMEL  
NEWPORT NEWS, VA**



**ONE-DAY RETREAT  
September 23, 2017**

*“Death is not right whenever it happens because we are wired for eternity.”*

As we made our way to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church (OLMC) in Newport News, it was a beautiful Virginia day with deep blue skies, lots of sun, and a pleasant, calming breeze. The OLMC team had everything ready and in place for its first-ever Diocese of Richmond parish retreat.



We were all excited to welcome more than 20 grieving parents from cities all over Virginia, including Newport News, Ruckersville, Lynchburg, Smithfield, Fairfax, Ruther Glen, Virginia Beach, Henrico, Suffolk, Yorktown, Montpelier, Emporia, and Charlottesville,

These parents included six couples and 11 individual parents. We honored 22 children (18 boys, two girls, and two unknown genders). Age at the time of death ranged from in utero to 40 years old. Time since the death of the child ranged from 4½ months to 48 years ago.

Causes of death included: illness (5); miscarriage (4); unknown (6); suicide (3); stillbirth (2); murder (1); and overdose (1).

Members of the retreat team included: Fr. Joe Goldsmith, Parochial Vicar, OLMC; Christa Blomstrom, Director of Evangelization, OLMC; Daniel Whitehouse, Director of Programs and Support, Diocese of Richmond; Guild of Saint Veronica Volunteers; Handmades of OLMC; Guild of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Volunteers; Alyson Perry; Tami Stalcup; Bernadette Waters; Beth Rapoza; and Charley & Diane Monaghan.

After a particularly moving Opening Prayer Service focused on Christ as the light of the world and our children as the light of our lives (a light that will never die), we were ready to begin the day.

Fr. Joe Goldsmith shared a beautiful reflection on the spirituality of the parent's grieving process. He began by asking, "What does Scripture have to say about grieving parents?" He cited King Herod's killing of the Holy Innocents and the horror of those parents; Elizabeth and Zachariah who felt their barrenness was a punishment; Mary and Joseph amazed at their miraculous pregnancy; and Mary at the foot of the cross, ever faithful to her beautiful son.

Particularly relevant is Mary, he said. She was the mother of a special needs child, a child that needed constant protection. How terrified did she feel when she heard Simeon tell her that a sword of sorrow would pierce her heart because of this child? Every day, she must have worried and wondered, "What is going to happen to this child of mine?"

Then again at the foot of the cross...she watched her son and the son of God, the Father, die. She held his body.

The death of Jesus and his conquering of that death in his resurrection is the epicenter of our faith, said Fr. Joe. Our faith is founded on the death of a child. In this way, our faith provides the context of where grieving parents can look for answers. This faith, he said, is based on the principle of hope.



***Death is not right whenever it happens because we are wired for eternity.*** Fr. Joe said that God did not create death and God does not want us to die. He created us for eternal life. Hope is our taste of eternity, our assurance that death does not have the final word. As St. Paul said, "We are saved with hope."

On your journey as a grieving parent, said Fr. Joe, hope is a gift from God. Accept it. Your children are now members of the Communion of Saints. You know this, without a doubt, he said, because they send you signs. Pray for these signs. Count on the prayers of your children and their signs, he said.

Our faith gives us the gift of hope, he reiterated, and this hope is confirmed by signs from those who have gone before us. Our hearts will be changed and we will begin to feel compassion for others. We will begin to open our hearts.

Listen for the Holy Spirit to inspire you, said Fr. Joe. He will begin with tiny steps, but he will inspire you and lead you. After looking into the darkness of death and the ugliness of the cross, beautiful things can happen. Keep trusting that that is true, said Fr. Joe.

After Fr. Joe's talk, we had a good discussion on signs. These signs are very real, said Fr. Joe, and we need to pay attention to them. It was amazing to hear about the many different types of signs parents receive from their deceased children.

These signs don't replace our faith, said Fr. Joe, they confirm it. They are another way of knowing our children are in God's hands and that we are worthy of God's love.

In thinking about our children and how they are now a very real part of the Communion of Saints



and consequently, alive and well and active in our lives, one parent offered this beautiful analogy... it's like our children are in the crowd of thousands of people who line the streets of Boston and its suburbs on Marathon Monday. We are the runners. Our children are there in the crowd, our biggest fans—cheering us on, offering us whatever help we need along the way, shouting how proud they are of us—and telling us to keep going, the end of our marathon is near.

Tami S. offered a very moving Parent Witness. I have found, she said, that the only way out of this pain is “leaning into God.” For a long time after her son died in a motorcycle accident, she wondered if she would ever feel joy again. Often she found solace wrapping herself in the fetal position. She began to believe she would always feel this way. “When he died, I died,” she said.

Eventually her husband helped her out of her downward spiral, telling her he wanted her back among the living. That prompted her to search for things that could distract her from her pain for one hour... yoga, piano lessons, painting, and writing. Eventually she began having more days that were brighter than darker, more joy than sorrow. She realized that her son would always be a part of her and that now she was his eyes and his voice.

She began reaching out to other grieving moms with “CJ Hope Chests.” These are boxes of gift-wrapped presents she gives to grieving moms to open whenever they are having a particularly bad day. She encourages them to do the same for other grieving parents. And so the vibrant life and spirit of CJ lives on.

“Do I still have dark days?” said Tami. “Yes, definitely. But now I have a raincoat and an umbrella to get me through.”



A favorite part of the day typically is breaking into small groups of mothers and fathers. When asked to share what happened, here are a few of the responses...

- “When I went to Compassionate Friends, I heard one sad story after another. Losing a child, if nothing else, makes you more compassionate. It took me a week to recover. What we need as grieving parents is the hope that our Catholic faith gives us and to focus on that hope.”
- “God tricked me into coming here. Believing that I had all of my grief in order, I came today to observe and learn how to bring this ministry to my parish. Very quickly I learned that I had a lot of work to do on my own grief journey.”

- The men’s group considered the question of why... why are we here today? What brought us here? We don’t know, they concluded. It felt like there was powerful sharing in the group, though few words were spoken.
- When discussing the idea of “controlled grief,” and functioning in everyday life, one mothers said she figuratively puts her grief into a literal “Grief Box” that she keep on a shelf in her home. When she goes to work or tends to the needs of her husband and other children the box stays on the shelf. When she is able, she takes the box off of the shelf and allows herself to grieve in a way that she finds comforting and constructive.

When it was time for the Emmaus Walk, Charley talked in detail about how the Gospel reading of Luke 24: 13-35 speaks to grieving parents after the death of their children. Just as Jesus accompanied his disciples on the road to Emmaus, he accompanies each of us on our journey. And just as Cleopas and the other disciple did not recognize Jesus, Charley said, many of us don’t recognize how Jesus holds us up in our sorrow. He encouraged parents to take a copy of Luke 24 on our handout table and reiterated how fitting a title it was for our ministry. Earlier, parents were encouraged to observe the Emmaus Ministry logo for a graphical image of Jesus walking with a grieving mother and father.



As a group, we invoked the Holy Spirit to guide who would be paired with whom for the Emmaus Walk. Many parents chose to walk the beautiful grounds around OLMC as they ministered to each other.

As the day drew a close, we joined the parish in a beautiful Saturday Vigil Mass celebrated by Fr. Joe. In his homily Fr. Joe talked about believing not only in the “God of 911,” whom we call on in crisis, but also the God who will never be outdone in his generosity.

The Closing Prayer Service at every Emmaus Ministry retreat is always very moving and cathartic. But this one was extra special in that Fr. Joe invited each parent up one by one, for a special individualized blessing sending us forth. He asked parents to tell him their special intentions (e.g. deep concerns for their other children, fears of broken marriages, lack of hope for the future, etc.). Remarkably, Fr. Joe then gave a beautiful, customized blessing to each parent.

Parents were then invited to mix some of the ash from letters they had written earlier in the day (which had been burned) with incense that was offered in prayer.

When asked about their thoughts and recommendations on the day, parents had this to say...

- *The retreat was an amazing experience and completely exceeded my expectations. I was unsure as to what to expect, but was open to anything that would help me grow closer to God, give hope and bring some peace. I am especially pleased it was done with traditional official church teachings.*
- *The retreat provided a very gentle and peaceful way to gather with others of the same experience; this provided me with a sense of belonging to a “family”.*

- *Thank you for your dedication in helping us carry the weight of “grief”. Jesus is seen through this ministry.*
- *I might suggest dividing the small groups by age of children, if possible, to give people a chance to talk with those experiencing a similar type of journey.*
- *The Holy Spirit entered my heart with full force during the candle ceremony and remains with me through this writing.*

And, with that, the Diocese of Richmond’s first-ever retreat ended as we joyfully sang “*Go in Peace*” and said goodbye to newfound friends who suddenly felt like family.

Currently the Diocese of Richmond has three additional Emmaus Ministry retreats scheduled in Virginia during 2018. See [www.emfgp.org](http://www.emfgp.org) for details.

