



ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON



ONE-DAY SPIRITUAL RETREAT ST. JOHN NEUMANN PARISH GAITHERSBURG, MD 9-10-22

HIGHLIGHTS

How does a 12-year-old get cancer? How does a 12-year-old die from cancer? How do his grief-stricken parents cope with the horror of losing a child? After their beautiful son, Christopher, succumbed to bone cancer, Jerri and Nick Emerson of Rockville* were completely inconsolable, and had nowhere to turn. Their pastor recommended they go to a Catholic spiritual retreat for grieving parents offered by the Archdiocese of Washington, DC in Gaithersburg in September. It seemed like too much work, they thought. We can't do that.



Several weeks later, Jerri got a call from her godmother in Nashville, TN. “You have to go to this spiritual retreat for grieving parents that I just found out about” she said. As a gift to you, I will fly from Tennessee to Maryland to take care of your three daughters for the day, so you can do this!” she said. Jerri and Nick saw this as a call from the Holy Spirit—and their beautiful son, Chris. There are no coincidences. So they came. And Jerri’s godmother didn’t have to fly in from Nashville.

On a beautiful, very sunny and delightfully warm September day, the Archdiocese of Washington, DC offered its third Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents spiritual retreat.

The Emmaus Ministry, available in various dioceses throughout the United States, has been pastorally ministering to grieving parents for the past 14 years. It serves the spiritual needs parents whose children of any age have died by any cause, no matter how long ago

St. John Neumann Catholic Church in Gaithersburg hosted the Emmaus Ministry retreat this year in their very welcoming Neumann House Retreat Center. Nineteen grieving parents joined us:

13 mothers and 6 fathers. Parents came from Rockville, Mt. Airy, LaPlata, Bowie, Germantown, Olney, Bethesda, Silver Spring, and Montgomery Village, MD, as well as McLean and Arlington, VA.

Thirteen children were honored. Time since their deaths ranged from only seven weeks to 20 years ago. Ages of the children at the time of death ranged from two years to 38 years. Cause of death included accident, suicide, illness, overdose, and natural causes.

Members of the retreat team included Msgr. Robert Panke, John Neumann Pastor; Carla Ferrando-Bowling and Sally Daniel of the Archdiocese of Washington Office for Family Life; Fr. Bob Kilner, Spiritual Leader; John and Barbara Barry, Michael's parents as Parent Retreat Leaders and donors; Tony and Ellen Castellano, Joseph's parents as Parent Witnesses and Retreat Team Supporters; well as Marie Warner, Nicholas' mother, who donated the Comfort crosses; Fiona Horsfall, Alexander's mother, who donated the Memorial Candles, and Horace Tsu, Cathryn's father, who donated retreat support..



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The retreat began with a very moving Opening Prayer Service during which we lit Memorial Candles with photos of our children, symbols of Christ, as the Light of the World and our children as the light of our lives. We heard readings from Jeremiah to *“Cease your cries of mourning; wipe the tears from your eyes. The sorrow you have shown shall have its reward. There is hope for your future.”*

Certain Hope for the future is the focus of Emmaus Ministry retreats. In concentrating on the rich teachings of the Catholic Church, parents focus on the fact that life for our children has *changed*, not ended; the promise of eternal life is very real; someday we will definitely all be together again.

Fr. Bob Kilner, pastor of St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Rockville, MD, opened the retreat with a poignant reflection on his godson, “John Paul, the Small” and the Seven Sorrow Devotion to Mary. John Paul was a “priestly soul,” he said, meaning one who draws people into God's order is a “priest.” This concept came up later in the retreat.

“The grief of our blessed Mother Mary,” said Fr. Bob, “allows us to enter into Jesus' passion through his mother. If anyone can understand the grief of a parent, it is Mary,” said Fr. Bob. “She meets you in your suffering. She understands the depth of your grief, as only a mother can. In the midst of so many swords, so much grief, love prevails. If you have the heart of a child, you can crawl on the lap of Mary and be loved by her right now and you will prevail,” said Fr. Bob. A vibrant discussion followed Fr. Bob's very touching reflection.

How do we keep our children alive? Fr. Bob said that his brother and sister-in-law continue to hang a Christmas stocking for their son, John Paul, every year. Instead of gifts inside the stocking, they write prayer intentions, filling the stocking to the top every year.

Should we ask our children to pray for us? Yes! said Fr. Bob. We are never closer to them than we are at Mass, especially during the Consecration.

Are signs from our children real? Yes! Fr. Bob cited roses that St. Therese of Lisieux often gave out.

Is it ok to be angry with God? Of course, said Fr. Bob. God will never tell us to deny our feelings. He can take it.

After a delicious lunch, we heard a very moving Parent Witness from Tony Castellano.

“The death of my son, Joe,” said Tony,” was like a piston pushing a huge piece of me outside of myself.” After a priest told us that it would take *years* to comprehend and deal with the death of my son, I realized that I needed to give myself permission to grieve.”



“What I learned in that first year,” said Tony “is that I was totally powerless. I needed to Trust and to *Entrust*. I needed to trust in Divine Mercy, God’s love, and our living faith. I needed to entrust my son to the Lord, just as I entrusted him when he went off to kindergarten and college.”

“I asked myself,” said Tony, “Can any good come out of Joe’s death? ...Yes, is the answer because I have learned to trust in the Divine Mercy of God’s love.

Then Tony held up an Emmaus Ministry handheld “Comfort Cross” given out at every Emmaus Ministry retreat. “The inscription on these crosses,” said Tony, is a *promise* from God... “Blest are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Afterwards, we broke into mother’s groups and father’s groups and talked about how the grieving process for each of us is radically different. On many levels, Moms grieve the gaping hole in their hearts and Dads want to fix it, but they can’t.

We took time to reflect and write letters to our children... baring our souls and sharing things we have never shared before. It felt good to finally say it.

Then we went on an “Emmaus Walk,” which is one-on-one sharing with another grieving parent of where we are in our spiritual journeys... of what we are feeling this day. The weather was perfect, so many of us decided to walk the amazing grounds and talk. Talking with another grieving parent who totally understands is a true gift and one that we are not often given. So we relished it.

During “Optional Time,” we were able to go to Reconciliation, meet with a Spiritual Director, continue with our Emmaus Walk Companion, or spend dedicated time in the Chapel reconnecting with Our Lord and our child.

After a beautiful Vigil Mass at St. John Neumann, we had a wonderful dinner. We thoroughly enjoyed being able to share it with each other. It is not often that grieving parents can break bread and talk freely about their children, so our evening dinner is an extremely important part of the retreat and one that both new and returning parents look forward to and remember.

Our Closing Prayer Service followed this emotionally and physically nourishing dinner. During the Closing Prayer Service, we affirmed that we will remember our precious children, no matter what. We also prayed, “God, Our Deliverer, remember all who love these children...parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousin, friends.” At the end of the service, we extinguished the wicks of the Memorial Candles.... only the wicks. The light of these candles, representing the Light of our children, will never go out.

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

- *Being with people of faith & not being “called upon” is a way to remember my son with people that understand – I like that we can just sit.*
- *Incredibly helpful. It has helped me find a way to process thoughts and emotions that I had no basis to rely upon. Better than I ever hoped it could be.*
- *Exceeded my expectations. Very helpful to hear from other parents and see them still living their lives while allowing themselves to grieve their child.*
- *My daughter just died in July. Having people who have gone through this several years ago has given me hope for my pan; it was very relevant.*
- *Yes, this was the first spiritual grief retreat/support we joined and it really provided the grace and reminder I needed to know we are not alone. I’m grateful for everyone who put this together.*
- *More one day retreats, maybe a weekend one?*

The Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents looks forward to a long and fruitful relationship with the Archdiocese of Washington, DC. Please keep checking www.emfgp.org for new locations and dates, which are added frequently.

*Please note that within these Highlights, some names have been changed.

