



**FAIRFIELD COUNTY
CATHOLIC CEMETERIES
DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT, CT**



**ONE-DAY RETREAT
ST. PIUS X PARISH, FAIRFIELD, CT
SATURDAY, JUNE 24, 2023
HIGHLIGHTS**

“I felt like I spent the entire day with my daughter!”

It was a muggy, dreary, rainy day in June when 26 grieving parents gathered at St. Pius X Parish in Fairfield, CT for the Diocese of Bridgeport’s Catholic Cemeteries’ second Emmaus Ministry retreat.

Parents walked into the Parish Center with lots of mixed feelings, including

- Hesitation... *“What did I get myself into by coming here?”*
- Annoyance... *“Why did I let my spouse talk me into this?”*
- Curiosity... *“What’s going to happen here today?”*
- Fear... *“What am I going to be forced to say or do?”*
- Peace... *“Finally, I’m going to get what I’ve been searching for.”*
- Comfort ... *“It feels so good to be back again.”*

Parents were also at many different places in their spiritual journey—from total non-belief to anger with God to tepid faith to ardent devotion.

By the end of the day, however, most were overwhelmed with a sense of joy and hope. *“Thanks to the Holy Spirit, I felt like I just spent the entire day with my daughter!”* They also felt a strong sense of community from making many new friends.

So what really happened here on this day? Twenty-five parents came to the retreat: 16 mothers and 10 fathers. They came from Milford, Norwalk, Stratford, Stamford, Newtown, Bridgeport, Easton, Brookfield, Fairfield, and Southport, as well as North Salem, NY and Princeton, NJ.

They were here to honor 20 children who have passed into eternal life: six sons and 14 daughters. Age at the time of death ranged from several hours to 53 years old. Cause of death included illness (7); accident (7); suicide (4); and accidental overdose (2).

When asked beforehand what they hoped to get out of the retreat, parents said:

- *A sense of peace, hope, and purpose;*
- *I don't know what I expect, I am just willing;*
- *I have strong faith, but need to know that he (my son) is ok;*
- *A re-awakened sense of faith.*



Members of the Retreat Team included:

- Carolyn Killian, Fairfield County Catholic Cemeteries—Retreat Coordinator
- Nancy Bentley, Fairfield County Catholic Cemeteries—Retreat Support
- Fr. Nick Pavia, Chaplain, Diocese of Bridgeport Bereavement Ministry, and Chaplain of St. Joseph's Manor—Spiritual Leader
- Deacon Don Ross, Margaret and Kathleen's Father, St. Pius X Parish—Parish Host, Prayer Service Leader
- Sue Stone—Parent Witness, Small Group Facilitator, Spiritual Direction
- Therese Wales, David's Mother—Litany of the Children
- Kier Butler, Meghan's Father—Retreat Support
- Kenn Devane, Cemetery Relations—IT Support
- Diane and Charley Monaghan—Retreat Support
- Dean Gestal, Executive Director, Fairfield County Catholic Cemeteries, Diocese of Bridgeport—Retreat Sponsor

After a heartfelt welcome from Carolyn Killian, Charley Monaghan explained the guidelines for the day, which significantly increased the comfort level of many parents:

- The entire focus of the ministry and this retreat is on Catholic teachings of life and death: life for our children has *changed*, not ended; our children were created as eternal beings; we will see them again; we can have a relationship with them, even now.

- Because we are not a support group, we will not be going around the room forcing people to talk. Parents are free to share as much or as little as they like. Many people participate by listening.
- All sessions are optional. If you prefer to spend your time in the chapel or walking the grounds, that is perfectly fine.
- The only person here today with all of the answers is not Fr. Nick, Charley and Diane, or our parent witness. The only person with all of the answers is the Holy Spirit.

The retreat officially began with a very moving Opening Prayer Service during which we prayed for God to open the eyes of our hearts; to help us to see what is important to hold in our hearts; and what we need to simply let go of in peace.

We heard about Christ as the Light of the World and our children as the light of our lives. Acknowledging the importance of the symbolism light, each of us lit a beautiful memorial candle that carried a photo of our child. This candle stayed lit the entire day and parents took their candles home.

One unique addition to this retreat was the “Litany of the Children.” After all of the candles were lit and parents paused for a moment of reflection, Therese Wales, one of our grieving parents with an absolutely beautiful voice, invited us to join her in song in asking our children to pray for us. Invoking each child by name, we sang the “Litany of the Children.” Parents love hearing the names of their deceased children aloud. Hearing them sung is even more comforting.

Another unique addition to this retreat’s Opening Prayer Service was our “Prayer Shawl Enfolding Ritual,” suggested by Deacon Don and written by Sue Stone. Each retreatant was invited to select, if they chose, a prayer shawl, which was prayerfully knit by St. Pius X, Fairfield; St. Therese’s, Trumbull; or St. James, Stratford.

We approached the altar holding our prayer shawls. One-by-one, Sue Stone and Kier Butler wrapped each of us in our shawls, hugged us and prayed for us individually, as we listened to the beautiful hymn, “Enfold Me in Your Love” by Monica Brown.

After the Opening Prayer Service and a short break, we were treated to a reflection by Fr. Nick, who didn’t disappoint!

Fr. Nick began his talk by saying we all needed to talk more about faith.



Citing St. John Vianney, he said, "*The eyes of this world see no further than this life. But the eyes of a Christian see deep into eternity.*"

Fr. Nick talked about how recently he had a friend who came to him desolate because she no longer feels the presence of her deceased husband. Fr. Nick had a notebook nearby, so he drew a picture of a stick figure representing the woman on the left side of the page and one representing her husband on the other side with a wide expanse in between.

In the middle he drew a blockage. "What is that blockage?" asked Fr. Nick. "Guilt," she replied, "I feel a lot of guilt." "You need to cut through that blockage to find a tiny entryway, so that you can begin to feel the presence of your husband again," said Fr. Nick. What is the blockage that is preventing us from feeling the presence of our precious children, Fr. Nick asked.

Later on in the day, a parent talked of a mother sharing with her daughter her dismay in also not being able to feel the presence of her other daughter, who had passed into eternal life. "That's because you are grieving the old Katie," the daughter said, "You need to get to know the new Katie." Profound.

Fr. Nick talked about how the Bible graphically shows God picking up Job by His fingers and conversing with him. Eventually Job realizes "You are God and I am not." No matter what happens, said Fr. Nick, remember Jesus' promise: "I will make all things good."

After a delicious lunch, we heard a wonderful Parent Witness from Sue Stone. Sue has a deep affection for the Road to Emmaus Luke 24 Gospel reading. She walked us through each part of the reading, explaining how we know for sure that Jesus is with us every step of the way, just as He was with his disciples on that Easter day.



Just as Jesus was with his disciples that day, she said, our children are with us today, though we may not realize it. The veil is very thin, said Sue. The Irish call it a "thin place." Our children are not in some faraway place. They are here with us.

Sue also talked about forgiveness. Her beautiful son, Ben, was killed by a drunk driver in New York City. I pray for him by name, said Sue. If I didn't forgive him, I could not participate in life. I had to get rid of the burden. It marked the beginning of my healing. He did serve time, but we decided not to go to trial. I am at peace with this decision.

Sue said at this point in her life she is overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude. She has reached a point where she doesn't need to cry to feel close to Ben. She can feel his presence in her joy. He was mine for 22 years, but now he is home again, she said.

Concluding her talk, Sue shared a poem by Henry Scott-Holland, "All is Well," which begins by reminding us that... ***Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room.***



Our retreat day begins with the entire group of parents gathering together. Throughout the day, however, we meet in small groups, one-on-one, and have time for individual reflections.

At various times, parents commented that... *Our children are waiting for us on the other side. We are not afraid to die. We have to be comfortable with not knowing why. It is the mystery of life and death. Someday, we will know.*

During the mothers' group, moms discussed many topics. "Surrender" was a theme of during which the mothers agreed that the only way to deal with the death of a child is to surrender it to Jesus. We can't do this on our own.

Mothers also discussed the fact that we were not in control of our children's death, but we are in control of what we do with that death. We can spiral downward or try to figure out a way to use it for good.

The fathers talked a lot about guilt. Guilt in not being able to prevent the death as protectors of the family. Guilt because of strained relationships before the death. As Catholics we believe, said one parent at another retreat, that after death, all relationships are healed. This is because all that is left after death is Love. All of the hard words will be forgotten.

Parents also had the opportunity to write letters to their children or to God. For many parents, this was cathartic. It is very freeing to say things that we want to say to our child today. To say things you wish you hadn't said. To share what you are feeling right now.

Parents were given the opportunity to take the letters home or have us burn them. Why burn them? Not because we want to erase our feelings. We burn them so that the smoke rises to heaven in prayer to our precious children and to God. Afterwards, we scatter the letters' ashes in a sacred place to return them to the earth, which is also a form of prayer.

A favorite activity of every Emmaus Ministry retreat is the Emmaus Walk where parents, after invoking the Holy Spirit to help us choose, are paired one-on-one with another parent to talk about where we are in our individual spiritual journeys.

By this time, the dark clouds gave way to sunshine and most parents took advantage of a beautiful trail nearby in a forested area, where we walked our Emmaus Walk together following a lively stream. Beautiful.

Parents then had optional time where they could spend time in the chapel in Adoration with the Memorial Candles, go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, experience a short version of Spiritual Direction, talk with each other or just relax or reflect on their own.

Emmaus parents then joined the St. Pius X parish in their vigil Mass. As grieving parents, we were acknowledged in prayer with a beautiful intercession during the Prayers of the Faithful.

After the Mass and another delicious meal, we gathered in the chapel for a poignant Closing Prayer Service, led by Deacon Don. We prayed the Litany of Healing and the “We Remember Them” prayer.

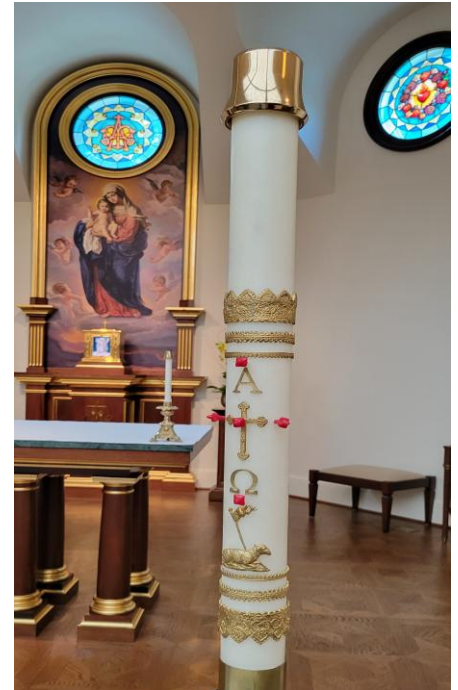
During the Closing Prayer Service, we extinguished the wicks of the candles of our children, but never their light. The brilliant light of our children will live on forever. After we extinguished the wicks and paused for a moment of reflection, we again asked our precious children to pray for us through the beautiful “Litany of the Children” sung once again by Therese Wales.

And so, another grace-filled Emmaus Ministry retreat, filled with the presence of our children, ended with lots of hugs as parent departed in deep gratitude.

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

- *“It helped confirm that sharing your child’s story in a place filled with the Holy Spirit is a blessing.”*
- *“Sharing our pain—and holding each others’ stories in sacred unity is healing.”*
- *“It gave me hope for peace.”*
- *“It provided spiritual food for the journey no one wants to be on.”*
- *“I think almost everybody in the room has had an “Emmaus-like” experience”*
- *“The Holy Spirit was with us,”*

The Diocese of Bridgeport Catholic Cemeteries has adopted the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents. Please see www.emfgp.org or <https://ctcemeteries.org/bereavement->



support/emmaus-ministry for information on upcoming Emmaus Ministry retreats. Or call 800-919-9332.

