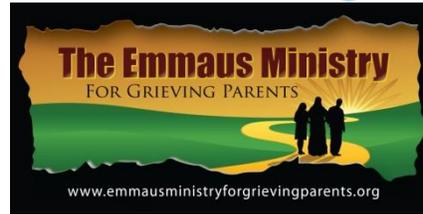




St. Anthony Shrine & Ministry Center



March 21, 2015 St. Anthony Shrine Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents Retreat Highlights



On a dark and overcast, snowy first full day of spring, more than 20 people gathered in the fifth floor friary of St. Anthony Shrine; the weather seemed to reflect our mood. In honor of the first full day of Spring and our retreat, small bunches of tulips were everywhere in the friary. Tulips continue to grow—even after they are cut—as do we, hopefully, as grieving parents.

Serving on the Retreat Team were Fr. Eric Carpine OFM, Bro. John Maganzini OFM, Peggy Hassett, Lois Diamond, Beth Rapoza, and Charley and Diane Monaghan. Parents attending had lost children in ages ranging from newborn to 48 years. Causes of death included illness, accident, suicide, and murder.

The day opened with Fr. John Hogan OFM, on behalf of all of the friars, graciously welcoming us to the friary. The Emmaus Ministry is the only ministry, at this time, invited to share the private living quarters of the friars for an entire day. So we were blessed to have this safe and warm environment for our retreat. Fr. John made us feel very welcome.

Having led many retreats himself, Fr. John urged us to focus throughout the day on two questions: “*Who is God to me?*” and “*Who am I to God?*” Later in the day Peggy asked the mothers’ group to consider “*What is one word you would use to describe God?*” and “*What is one word God would use to describe you?*” Good questions to ponder.

Bro. John led us in the Opening Prayer Service, which began with his beautiful explanation of candles representing Presence...the presence of Christ, the presence of our children, and the presence of our love for our children—all joined together. Before blessing the candles, bearing the photos and names of our children, Fr. Eric offered this beautiful prayer:



**Lord, this candle that I have lit
May it be light from you to lighten my way through difficulties and decisions.
May it be fire from you to burn up my selfishness and pride, and all that is impure in me.
May it be flame from you to warm my heart and teach me to love.
Lord, I cannot stay long in your house.
This candle is a little bit of myself that I offer to you.
Help me to continue my prayer in all that I do this day.
--From a prayer used in the Cathedral of Tours.**

“When we light a candle in church for a loved one,” said Bro. John, “our prayer continues to rise all day long, even after we leave.”

Newly introduced at this retreat was a commitment to light a special memorial candle *In Loving Memory of the Beloved Children of our Benefactors*, those who financially help to ensure the continuation of our ministry. Along with photos of benefactors’ children, this special candle stayed lit and the children were held in prayer the entire day.



Then Fr. Eric offered very moving reflection. He began by saying that, while he never had children, he does feel a connection with us because he worked as a social worker for many years in the neonatal unit of a hospital and companioned parents on the passing of their children. One thing he learned, he said, is that the bond between parent and child can *never ever* be broken and that it lasts forever.

In terms of where we are now, Fr. Eric said that God talks to each of us every day. We may not want to listen, but He talks to us. If we sit in quiet and listen, we will hear. To free your mind, try using a Taize chant, such as “*Jesus...remember me, when you come into your kingdom,*” he suggested.

He also urged us to get a small notebook and write down our conversations to God—possibly in the form of a psalm. The psalms of the Old Testament were all written from the heart, mostly by David, who, himself, was a broken vessel.

Psalms cry out in sorrow, fear, relief, peace, and petitions for safe journeys. Writing our own...getting it out and down...can help tremendously, he said. The psalms are similar to the Soliloquy of St. Bonaventure, which reminds us that...

**Christ on the cross bows his head,
Waiting for you,
That he may kiss you,
His arms are outstretched,
That he may embrace you,
His hands are open,
That he may enrich you,
His body spread out,
That he may give himself totally,
His feet are nailed,
That he may stay there,
His side is open for you,
That he may let you enter there.**

Listen to what your heart is saying, said Fr. Eric, you may even hear your child. That cord is never broken. He concluded by urging us to consider Edward Hayes' psalm on Loss by Death:

**Part of me is gone:
What years of love and affection
Had fused in me as one
Has now been cut away.**

**I stand now on a single leg
And work with only one arm.
My heart has been split
By the stripping
Of what I've learned to feel
As an integral part of my being.**

**By the surgery of separation
I've become an amputee,
Disabled by death.
O Divine healer of hearts
Remind me daily not to expect
A miracle of quick recovery.**

**Guide me as I stumble,
Blinded by my tears,
Limping along from the loss
Of the one I have loved.
Teach me that even cripples
Can again learn to dance.**

**Enlighten me to see
That in my vault of memories
Lies the healing herb
That renders pain less deadly:
The remembering and reliving
Of my rosary of our many moments of love.
And grace me with your regenerating presence
So that I can begin again.**

After a much needed break, we regrouped to hear several parents give witness to where they are currently in their spiritual journeys of grief. Lois Diamond gave a very moving account of her journey as a single mother raising her beautiful son, Eric.

She talked of her faith journey from attending Sunday School as a child and her conversion to Catholicism to that fateful night in the emergency ward of Tufts Medical Center in February of 2012. The vigil by her son's bedside was remarkable. During that time she had many revelations about his life and his passing. She said that, on her own road to Emmaus, she felt that Jesus was truly with her. Throughout her journey, she never lost her faith in God. Yet, it is difficult, she admits. She has to constantly remind herself of the image Bro. John offered in one

of our Brown Bag Lunch Retreats... that, as we journey, Jesus is holding us up with one arm; Mary is holding us up with the other arm; and Eric, her son, is pushing from behind!



Another parent asked the group to join her in singing a “*Holy Ground*” mantra that she often used in her own journey. Several other parents shared their own poignant stories.

After lunch, we met in small groups as mothers and fathers and shared our reflections on who God is for us right now... our friend, protector, guide, father... God is love.

We regrouped to talk about anything that struck us in the small group session. A rather lengthy, lively discussion ensued. It was very comforting to feel as if we could openly share anything with each other from the despair of not being able to stop crying to our anger with God because of “*Why me? Why my child?*” We were sorry to see the sharing, which could have gone on for much longer, end.

Afterwards, we were invited to write our own psalms...to God or to our child. These psalms, after being placed on the altar in the chapel, were respectfully burned, then mixed with incense and used a few hours later at the Mass. Fr. Eric explained that our psalms, like incense, would rise in prayer.

A favorite part of every retreat is the Emmaus Walk where, with the help of the Holy Spirit, parents are paired to walk with each other. It was good to be able to share our own journeys one-on-one and to hear about the journey of another parent. Truly the Holy Spirit at work.

Parents than had the choice of spending time in Reconciliation, Spiritual Direction, Stations of the Cross for Grieving Parents, or quiet reflection in the chapel.

An absolutely beautiful Mass celebrated by Fr. Eric followed, during which Bro. John read the names of each of the children of parents at this retreat, as well as the names of beloved children of our benefactors.

During his homily, Fr. Eric said that all of the readings pointed to the fact that Jesus had to come to terms with death. He would like the cup to pass, but He knows He must go through it, as do we. Fr. Eric encouraged us to open our eyes and our mind to *penetrate our being* to the knowledge of God’s love. Listen to your hearts, he said, and know that God is with you. In the midst of the dark, snowy day, at that particular moment rays of sunshine poured through the beautiful stained glass windows of the friary chapel. Unbelievable.



After dinner in a particularly moving Closing Prayer Service, we ended the retreat with the laying on of hands by the friars and the Sacrament of Anointing, administered by Fr. Eric and Fr. Richard Flaherty OFM.

We extinguished the wicks of the candles, knowing with conviction and without a doubt that the Light of Christ and the Light of our child will live on forever in our hearts, no matter what. We joined the friars in singing “Salve Regina.”

Afterwards, parents were asked to tell us how they felt about their retreat experience...

“This was an amazing experience in my journey of understanding and redefining “me” here on Earth without my daughter.”

“It was a wonderful, peaceful day. I was with great people who, unfortunately had experienced the loss of their child. I wasn’t sure what to expect. Let me just say.... I will be back.”

“...A beautiful day. I felt like my son was smiling down at me. I cried and I laughed.”

“Very powerful and moving—from the candle lighting, prayer service, and being with other parents who get it. It’s a safe place to be.”

Then, yet another Emmaus Ministry Retreat for Grieving parents ended.

