

St. Mary's Parish, Franklin, MA



One-Day Retreat June 10, 2017

"I Need to Know I am Still His Mom"

It was a spectacularly beautiful spring day as we traveled to St. Mary's in Franklin, MA very early Saturday morning. The skies were deep blue; the forecast was great; and the traffic was light.

We welcomed an almost-capacity crowd of 23 parents from Franklin and 14 surrounding towns. Eighteen of the parents had never been to a retreat before; five were returners. We were about to honor 20 children whose ages at death ranged from prenatal to 47 years old. Time since the death ranged from 11 weeks to 36 years ago.



Members of the Retreat Team included Fr. Brian Manning, Pastor of St. Mary's; Nan Rafter, Pastoral Associate and Parish Nurse at St. Mary's; Patricia Murphy, Office Manager and Hospitality Coordinator; Knights of Columbus, Sacred Heart Council #1847; Terry Kerr, Music Director; Prayer Shawl Ministries of St. Mary's, St. Mark's

Episcopal Church in Foxboro, and Blessed Sacrament in Walpole; and many St. Mary's Hospitality Volunteers throughout the entire day.

The retreat started off with a heartfelt welcome from Fr. Brian Manning, who spent the entire day with us (8am-8pm), and whose presence was greatly appreciated by all. Thank you, Fr. Brian!

After a particularly moving Opening Prayer Service during which parents lit their children's candles, representing the fire of life and the very real presence of the Risen Lord, we heard an inspiring Reflection by Fr. Brian.

Fr. Brian talked about the three questions that really speak to us...

Why?

Where is God in all of this stuff?

Where are our children now?

After sharing his personal story of how he lost both of his parents in six days---and two of his precious siblings that he personally parented for many years, we knew that he understood some of our pain.

Fr. Brian reiterated his own absolute, unalterable belief in God's gift of healing after the death of a loved one. However, he said, that his belief in Christ and the Resurrection is much stronger some days than others.



He said that he totally believes in the Communion of Saints and that is how all living and deceased people are connected...that it is a very real way of connecting with our children. They are alive and well!

In many of his Masses at St. Mary's, Fr. Brian prefers the "Apostle's Creed," as opposed to the "Nicene Creed" because, to him, it is much more understandable as a statement of exactly what we, as Catholics, believe. He especially likes the list at the end. This creed takes on different meanings at different times in our lives, he said.

The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the
power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.

On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge

the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

As Catholics... this is what we believe.

Parents who come to Emmaus Ministry retreats can participate by listening only—
or share their insights at various times throughout the day.

Here are highlights of some of the insights that they shared...

"I knew I was supposed to be here today because two particular Scripture readings kept calling out to me all week... 'Jesus Wept' and 'Jesus, the Good Shepherd.' Both readings really struck me because they truly show the humanity of Jesus. He was human. He did feel pain. And he can definitely understand our pain."

"When we gathered around my son's bedside as he was in excruciating pain and dying from pancreatic cancer, he said to us... 'I am the luckiest person in the world!' When we asked him why he believed this, he said because he was completely surrounded by love and could literally feel its embrace. At the moment of his death, a beautiful smile came over his face. I am sure he was smiling at his grandparents who came to welcome him."

"After my son died, I saw a lot of blue butterflies that I believe are signs from my son. One day I was in CVS rushing past the card section when I saw just a blue butterfly on the front of a card. Inside it said, 'Live. Love. Laugh.' That was definitely my son talking to me!"



"One of the best books I have read since my son died is Rabbi Harold Kushner's When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Rabbi Kushner says that God doesn't cause suffering; he

“allows” suffering. When we suffer, Jesus suffers with us and He is sad for us.”

“I have come to realize that I have mad, sad, and joy days. The more mad days I have, the fewer the sad or joy days. So, my goal is to have fewer mad days.”

“Miracles do happen. The fact that a teenager grew in faith and love so much that he could accept his own death is a miracle in my mind.”

“I need to know that I am still his mother.”

“Not only are we still mothers, we are still mothering our deceased children.”

At first, it seemed like there were a few coincidences at this retreat, but we believe there are no coincidences... only the work of the Holy Spirit.

- Two of our three retreat couples were celebrating their wedding anniversaries the day of the retreat. One couple had been married 45 years, the other couple 39 years. They said they thought coming to this retreat was the perfect way to celebrate their love for each other.
- Two mothers who had lost their children years ago walked into the retreat and instantly recognized each other from 14 years ago when each of them participated in a Pieta support group in Walpole.
- Typically we don't ask what religion a parent is when they register for or come to a retreat. However, at this retreat several parents shared that they were agnostics, Protestants, and lapsed Catholics. Despite this fact, after the retreat, each parent said that they found much peace and comfort here this day.
- The Emmaus Ministry is very new to Facebook. But it seems to be a good idea because three of our parents at this retreat found us via Facebook. Please “Like Us” on Facebook!



The retreat ended with a beautiful Mass celebrated by Fr. Brian. One person asked if we chose dates for retreats based on Scripture readings for the day. No, we said, we leave all of that to the Holy Spirit, but inevitably the readings are perfect because so many of them talk about suffering and the promise of eternal life. This week was no exception as we heard...
“God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3: 16)

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

- *“I am exhausted, but it is a good exhaustion. I loved being able to focus my attention and love on my son. I will hopefully be able to go forward and still be his mother, but now to his spirit.”*
- *“I found an inner peace at this retreat.”*
- *“Emotionally cleansing.”*
- *“Peaceful. Supportive. Uplifting.”*
- *“Reaffirmed my faith.”*

And, so, another Emmaus Ministry Retreat concluded. We look forward to working with Nan R. and Fr. Brian and the many parishioners of St. Mary’s in Franklin in the future.

